

PITY THE POOR BLIND

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

'The Pilgrims' March

The Corner of Harley Street

Six Impressions

Punch - 'The minute I saw the book I knew I should love it - it has that look about it - So I have read it, and now I am going to read it again.

Edinburgh Couriers - 'The writer is a man with a me low mind. He has seen a good deal of life - and after seeing it he remains tolerant and optimistic.

Evening Standard - 'The author is a kindly physician, and his self-revelation reveals him as tolerant and sympathetic, as well as cheerful.

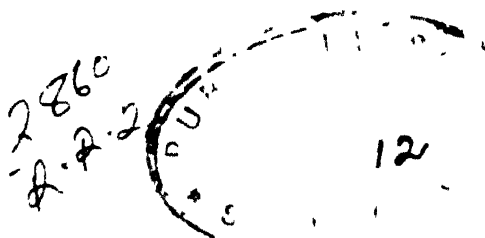
PITY THE POOR BLIND

BY

H. H. BASHFORD

A THOUGHT ON THE CORNER OF MARLEY STREET

SECOND IMPRESSION



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TO MY WIFE

"Oh that I knew where I might find him!"—
Job xxiii. 3.

"Perhaps my happiness has passed close to me, and in my blindness I have not seen it. Perhaps the voice has spoken, and the noise of the storms within me has prevented me from hearing. Perhaps . . . I have made a great mistake."—*Mademoiselle de Maupin*.

PITY THE POOR BLIND

CHAPTER I

I

FATHER LUCY, the well-known vicar of St. Ninian's, Poplar, removed his biretta, smoothed some white dust from his cassock, and sat down in his chair with a sigh. He was a singularly well-built man, nearer fifty than sixty, grey-haired and of a sanguine complexion, with handsome, very luminous eyes, and so obviously in the maturity of his powers that his sigh could scarcely have sprung from any physical distress. That much, at any rate, would have been so clear to an observer that he (or she) must necessarily have interpreted it on other and more spiritual lines—as the expression, perhaps, half involuntary, of some moment's tiredness of soul.

For it would have sounded involuntary; and the smile that would have followed it—had anybody been present—would certainly have been radiant enough to prove this. And it would have followed so quickly, too, that you—if it had happened to be you—would have found yourself unable to judge either save in conjunction with the other; the sigh

robbing the smile of any undue frivolity, the smile raying the sigh with the high courage of hope.

Thus the sigh would have suggested Poplar, that distressing parish of humanity; the dear People; their needs; their ignorance; and even—dare it hint as much? (but *you* will understand)—their very trying stupidity. While the smile would have indicated what dear People they became nevertheless, when understood as Father Lucy understood them. And while the sigh would thus have touched upon the great work to be yet accomplished, the smile would have been comforting evidence as to the amount already done. Moreover, as a quite incidental result, you yourself—if it had still happened to be you—would have carried away in your mind the remembrance of a rather unusually delightful personality, at once spiritual, yet not uncomfortably so, masterful, but only of necessity, and withal unfailingly debonair—an aristocrat consecrated to the People, a churchman brotherly to the World.

But, as it chanced, on this particular afternoon there was nobody present; so that the smile did not follow the sigh—or at any rate until Father Lucy had set his lips to his tea, and found it tepid for the fifth time in succession. And then it occurred to him how humorously this little fact might be used to convey in Kensington, next Sunday morning, some sense of what St. Niman's stood for—with its great church so admirably served; with its Chapel of the Blessed Virgin, always open for meditation; with its Confessional, so richly attended; with its Pull-up for Car-men,

red-bricked and costly, where a bed might be obtained for fourpence a night, and good food at equivalent rates; with its Clergy House, the largest in East London; and its Sisterhood, the busiest in England. No wonder, therefore, that its Head must sometimes be contented with cold tea, and often enough, indeed, without any tea at all.

He leaned back in his chair, pleasantly conscious, at its heart, of this great system that he had brought into being. For even now, in the quietest hour of this July afternoon, it throbbed beneath him like an unresting engine—from the plate-glass windows upon the pavement to the dim aisles of the church behind; from the home-made buns upon the counter to the prayer-cards upon the purgatorial board. The smile that had been flickering upon his lips deepened a little over some associated memories—inquisitive protests on the part of certain scraggy-bearded Kenaites; and how neatly he had floored one of them with an upper-cut learned at Eton. There had been other remonstrances, too, episcopal and more dignified, written, as he had been assured, in sorrow, and a little, he had suspected, in envy. Well, well—and the great engine had merely gathered fuel from the unsought advertisement that had resulted. What else, indeed, could have happened with an organisation so sound, with results so abundantly visible? And there recurred to him an old University saw, adapting itself very gracefully to these other circumstances, "There are many bishops, but only one Father Lucy"—into whose strong and well-groomed hand a neat maid-servant now put a little letter.

II

Now in the dispassionate history of an obscure and, one fears, rather unattractive young man, there is always the difficulty of the beginning. For mere birth, at best, comes so late in the real story that to begin there would seem to be shirking the chief problems of the task. Into that various stream of his becoming it would be no more than the lowering of the conduit. And yet, struggling back, even a very little way, up those unknown, turbulent waters, how desperately likely is the narrative to submerge not only itself and its readers, but also the obscure young man.

Almost immediately, therefore, and however arbitrarily, a concrete starting-point becomes necessary; which is why with so peculiar a convenience this little letter now seems to emerge—handed by the neat maid-servant to Father Lucy, and presently to be passed on by him to the Rev^d. Albert Thompson. By an odd chance, too, it happened to be the only one in this particular delivery—so that Father Lucy was tempted to permit himself a certain deliberation in his dealings with it.

Thus, leaning back in his chair, he held the envelope between his two forefingers, and scanned its superscription from beneath leisurely eyelids—not because he believed it possible to judge character from calligraphy, but because, though the hand-writing was quite unfamiliar to him, the postmark seemed less so, though in a connection that he could not trace.

Then, priding himself upon a memory from which escape was rare, he leaned foryward and opened a drawer, whence he selected a map of Dorsetshire, and where presently he discovered the place that it represented. Wingbarrow, Kilridge, Driver Head—Windy, and Basin Pool—there it was—Kilridge—a tiny village upon the coast, and possessing apparently, not the least significance.

And then quite suddenly he remembered Mr. Pratt, the little, red-bearded parson whom he had met last summer at a Swiss hotel. There had been an absurd sister, too—so there had—with elastic-sided boots. And it had been their first excursion to Switzerland, or indeed to anywhere else beyond Great Britain. It was partly in consequence of this, he supposed, that they had been so patently nervous as to have become, before he arrived, the gentle laughing-stocks of the hotel.

Moreover, being sensitive little souls, they had perceived this almost at once; and, leaning back now, he could not help smiling to recall how eagerly they had scanned him—the only other person in orders—on his first appearance at table. He remembered that; but he remembered also (and he was rather glad to do so) how the whim had seized him; so that long before he left they had become not only his life-worshippers, but the privileged guests of hotel fashion—lifted thereto, half in jest, upon his own secure popularity.

He chuckled softly, slipping a plump finger into the envelope. Poor little man—and so he was ill now; and please would Father Lucy help him? It was not for more than three Sundays that he

would be wanting a substitute, who should not, however, if possible, insist upon anything extreme. There would be no difficulty as regarded the bishop; and the newcomer would enjoy not only a pleasant vicarage in a particularly bracing air, but the best attentions of Ann Byng, a really excellent cook. Moreover, the work would not be hard, although the presence of visitors in the village always rendered the summer months a little more interesting, perhaps, and important; which was the reason, indeed, why he so hesitated to apply to the usual advertising agencies.

On the other hand, Father Lucy mustn't imagine that he had applied to him too lightly. But he had just exhausted, in vain, all his more intimate resources; and though the bishop had been kind enough to promise him help in a few weeks' time he had suddenly felt himself to have come to the end of his powers.

Poor little man—Father Lucy ate a thoughtful biscuit. So do one's good deeds, he reflected ruefully, always come home to roost; though he thought, perhaps, that as it happened he might be able to help him. For, apart from his senior assistant, Father Matthews, he had four youngsters working under him, who must all have their holidays; and from whom, for their souls' good, he exacted an almost military obedience. Why not, therefore, commanding a missionary fidelity, confer at once not only peace upon Pratt, but a probably valuable occasion of sound Catholic influence upon the unsuspecting inhabitants of Kilridge?

For a moment, indeed, it was this—the

disciplinary aspect of the matter—that made to him the greater appeal. But then next moment, with a real sentiment of tenderness, he remembered how old Father Matthews had become faint last Sunday; and how all efforts to make him rest were invariably foiled. He frowned a little, wondering if by chance he could persuade him to go. For Father Matthews—a poor old deaf thing—was perhaps the only person at St. Ninian's to whom he habitually assumed this rather inexplicable attitude—half bantering, half reverent, but never wholly imperative.

Then he rang the bell, and had him sent for, and laid a genial hand upon his shoulder.

"Sit down, Matthews. You won't smoke, I suppose? Well, I want your advice."

He handed him the letter, explaining it briefly, as one learns to explain things to a deaf person; and then, without further diplomacy, invited him to accept the offer.

"I should like you to go," he said. "From all points I should *like* you to go, although—er——"

Father Matthews bent his head for a moment.

"Do you insist?" he inquired at last, and then, colouring a little, "Do you really feel, I mean, that I—I ought to undertake this visit?"

Father Lucy smiled—the familiar, radiant smile—and laid his strong hand again on the old man's knee.

"Do I ever insist?" he asked.

Father Matthews regarded him seriously, and shook his head.

"I don't suppose," he said, "that you ever expected me to say 'yes,' did you?"

"No," said his vicar, "I'm afraid not—you—you obstinate old warrior."

Father Matthews winced.

"So tell me—tell me, whom *am* I to send?"

He bent down a muscular finger as he pronounced each name.

"Carthew, Vavasseur, Thompson, or Rowley?"

Father Matthews was silent. In all these years so many such names had flitted across his stage.

"But why do you ask *me*?" he said presently.

Father Lucy stroked his chin.

"We-ell," he said, "originally, of course, I had hoped that you might go, yourself."

Father Matthews looked down again. Then he said slowly,

"I think that I should send Mr. Thompson."

"Why Thompson?" asked Father Lucy.

Father Matthews glanced at him quickly.

"You don't like him?" he said.

Father Lucy waved his hand.

"I make it a rule, as you know," he began, and then cut himself short rather abruptly. It was always difficult, for obscure reasons, to finish a sentence of that sort to old Matthews—which may be taken, perhaps, as partially explaining his kindly but general isolation.

"You think him conceited," pursued Father Matthews.

"Well?"

"Inclined to—to be pushing."

Father Lucy looked a little grim.

"Not—not perfectly well-bred."

Father Lucy looked surprised, and then smiled again. "Has the poor young man offended you?" he inquired.

"No," said Father Matthews.

"You seem to have studied him very carefully."

Father Matthews shook his head.

"I was only imagining," he explained, "what you would probably think about him."

Father Lucy smiled once more.

"But you're forgetting," he said, "that he has been with us for five years."

"No," said Father Matthews, "I remember his coming quite well; and how his—his natural gifts impressed us all. But I—I thought that your—his—your attitude to one another had changed a little lately."

Father Lucy was silent for a moment, drumming softly upon his desk.

"Well," he said, "thinking all that about him, why on earth should I send them Thompson?"

Father Matthews moved his hands a little nervously. It was, as he seemed to recognise, a rather feeble reason.

"Because I think," he said, "that he's not quite happy."

Father Lucy drew a circle, and another that intersected it. Then he asked presently,

"Do you happen to know where he is?"

Father Matthews rose to his feet.

"I'm not quite sure," he replied, "but I rather fancy that he's having tea with his mother"—a lady, however, not pertinent to the System.

CHAPTER II

I

It is in this fashion, then, that we come at last to Mr. Thompson himself, emerging, even as the Fathers discussed him, from the Shepherd's Bush exit of the Central London Railway—a rather tall, rather pale young priest, whom it will be found a little difficult to regard, perhaps, with an altogether unprejudiced eye.

Nor, for the moment, at any rate, can his setting lend him much aid—a kind of clamorous junction, all meeting and starting points, having no inward peace of its own, and existing, apparently, merely to be departed from.

Even Mr. Thompson himself, preoccupied as he was, was half aware of being irritated by it all; by its general more prosperous discontent (as compared with Poplar); by its particular cheap shops, ostentatiously gaudily for the tram-loads; by the peeling façade of the Great Exhibition, with its pink plaster cupids; by the Shepherd's Bush Green, going bald in patches (as of ringworm on a slum-child's head), crowned as to its apex by the cab-shelter, like a last year's biscuit-tin; and flanked as to its sides by the overhead wires and the underfoot rails.

There were some children, too, and a stout lady

with a dog, who were detracting dignity from his efforts to cross the pavement. And here, shouting, and running behind him, came the lift-attendant, carrying in his hand the copy of the *Church Times* that he had happened to drop in the lift.

For a moment he hesitated, on the point of telling the man that he did not want it. But then, remembering his mother, he received it from him gracefully; bowed his head; and assured him in rich tones that it was really too good of him to have taken so much trouble. It would probably, indeed, have been those tones that would have attracted your attention to him, even if later you had decided them to have been too dramatic. For they proceeded from one of those voices that consort so oddly with their possessors as never wholly to miss a certain effect of surprise—a voice so deep, and of so agreeable a quality that even the lift-attendant seemed visibly affected, while two ladies—not unobserved by Mr. Thompson—turned round, and made audible comments.

"Wouldn't mind 'earin' that feller preach—what?" said one of them; and the lift-man, forgetting his principles, touched his hat.

"Now, damn it," he thought, "why ever did I do that?"

For a minute, therefore, clasping his *Church Times*, and conscious (it would be mere affectation to deny it) of having achieved a familiar result, you would have seen the frown fade a little from his forehead. He would have been almost smiling, indeed, as he crossed the road—but with a smile, alas, singularly transient. For long before he had

arrived at his mother's lodgings, there he was again, eyebrows drawn, striding over these unregarded pavements—poor Mr. Thompson, thirty-one years old, and already past his first dreams.

And yet, since at this age one can already look back a little, he could not but feel that he had fought a good fight; so that, if he reproached himself on his present position, it was less on account of its proximity to his starting-point than by reason of its threatening air of finality. Thus, acting for the wisest, he couldn't help naturally resenting the chance that had led him, as it were, into this *cul-de-sac*—a situation beyond which future progress seemed uncertain, and from which a retreat (even a tactful one) was almost equally perilous. For while it was true, of course, that St. Ninian's represented the extremest vanguard of the most popular Anglican wing, yet its very prominence, as he was acutely aware, was at present causing it to be regarded rather askance—at any rate, in those official quarters that ought surely, in wisdom, to be conciliated. And though to Father Lucy himself, serene, wealthy, and well born, this was merely, no doubt, a matter of amusement, what would this mean to Father Lucy's young men?

Then, turning a corner, he caught sight of himself in an estate-agent's window—a not wholly unsatisfactory vision, though less convincing, perhaps, in these ordinary black clericals than in the girdled cassock of Poplar. And yet the sight only deepened his perplexity. For surely, with such a presence, and with that striking combination of what had so

cleverly been described as a tenor appearance with an almost startlingly baritone voice—surely, with all this, the Church held something higher in store for him than to play fourth fiddle to Father Lucy ? And yet again, only five years ago, to become a co-worker at St. Ninian's had seemed a certain prelude to promotion ; and his graceful eagerness for the position had obviously melted Father Lucy.

But then, had it ? For, alas, now he was doubtful even of this—a closer acquaintance with his vicar rendering it increasingly improbable ; so that, altogether, one thing only was clear—that never, perhaps, in all his life, had more depended on the acuity of his foresight.

" Poor Albert," exclaimed his mother, as she peered anxiously down the Sulgrave Road, " I can see that the poor boy's worryink—I can see it even from 'ere."

She shook her blonde hair, arranged in Mr. Thompson's honour by Madame Bertie of the Goldhawk Road.

" It's a shame, Mrs. Parkins," she continued, " that's what I call it, a downright shame—the way that old Lucy works 'is priests."

" Reely ?" said the languid young lady, who was engaged in spreading the tea-cloth.

Mrs. Thompson glanced over her shoulder.

" Oh, it's you, M'ria, is it ?" she apologised. " I thought that it was your auntie's tread."

" Aunt's got a headache," said Maria, who was a pupil-teacher and sensitive to aspirates.

" Dear me, I'm sorry for that," said Mrs. Thompson, " an' I'm afraid my poor Albert's got one, too.

I wonder if he'd mind my runnin' out to meet 'im."

She climbed down from her chair, and smoothed her frock.

"Better not, p'raps," she concluded, "considerin' 'oo may be lookin' out."

She glanced critically at the table.

"You won't forget the jam, will you? My Albert's such a one for the jam."

"I'll bring it up with the tea-pot," said Maria.

Mrs. Thompson suddenly dashed from the room.

"There he *is*," she cried. "How are you, dee-ree? How *are* you after all this long time?"

Mr. Thompson winced a little at the "dee-ree," but saluted her twice very tenderly, and permitted himself to be drawn into the parlour, and made comfortable in the best armchair. Then she took from him his hat and gloves, and laid them with reverence on the sideboard, while Mr. Thompson, after a glance at the table, gazed abstractedly at the opposite wall. Two photographs hung there, both faded, but one somewhat fresher than the other, the older representing his grandfather, who had been a Low-Church curate of irreproachable extraction; and the other an enlarged cabinet of his father, who had been a musician and unfortunately married beneath him—or, in stricter parlance (now lapsing a little), a piano-tuner who had become wedded to an actress.

Nor was she, as has perhaps become evident, a very good actress even at that. It would be nearer, indeed, to the truth to describe her as having once worked for a time at a theatre; and now, with

reproachful eyes, she darted back again from the side-board. She pressed a finger upon Mr. Thompson's wrinkles.

"There you are," she chided, "at it again."

After which, quite regardless of Maria, she stooped down to cover them up with a kiss—a calamity that Mr. Thompson avoided, but that a real lady, he felt, would not even have attempted.

II

But while, in the presence of Maria, it had been his obvious duty to rebuff her, he made amends, when she had withdrawn herself, by dropping a kiss upon his mother's forehead. Then sitting down, and helping himself liberally to bread and butter and jam, he scolded her pleasantly for her lack of restraint. She gave a little shake to Madame Bertie's masterpiece.

"Of course," she said, "I can see quite well that you're laughin' at me. But you weren't *really* angry, were you? Besides—'oo's M'ria, I should like to know? Impertinent little chit, that's what I call her."

"Well, Mummy dear, but isn't that all the more reason——?"

"Why I shouldn't kiss my own son if I want to?"

With humorous impatience, Mr. Thompson tapped the table.

"No, no, Mummy dear, of course it isn't. But—oh, well, if you don't *see*——" and then he had to rise up hurriedly, and kiss something away from poor Mummy's right cheek.

Pity then this embarrassed young priest, so tantalisingly blessed by Nature, but—for the present, at any rate—so unjustly handicapped by Circumstance. Even at St. Paul's school, indeed, where as a boy he had obtained a scholarship, he had begun to feel its stern weight upon his shoulders. For there had been the sad day—he would never forget it—when a fellow-scholar, whose parental piano had just been operated upon, had spread abroad the grim truth about his father. He remembered even now how he had wilted under that storm, and how lamentably an impassioned reference to his grandfather had failed to avert any portion of its severity. And then, as if that had not been enough trial for one day, he remembered how Mummy had chosen that very evening to appear in full person for him at the school-gate.

Afterwards, in a tumult of humiliation, he had seen clearly just where he had gone wrong; and how far better his purpose would have been served by a humble admission of financial misfortune, grandfather being brought in later—ever so casually—to seal pity with prestige. But then, in spite of that, what about Mummy? For this was the first time that he had beheld her from a new and rather terrible angle; against the background, cold and exacting, of a larger and more critical world. And it had begun to dawn upon him even then, as he first pledged himself to his own social salvation, that it was Mummy, even more than his father, who was to play the mill-stone to the struggling swimmer.

That had been perhaps the last day of his boyhood

although he was a paid alto still at St. Margaret's, Hammersmith; and next year, when his father died, his sojourn at St. Paul's had come necessarily to a close. For Mummy couldn't possibly exist upon the interest of the insured thousand pounds; and it had been necessary for Albert, almost at once, to find employment in some city office.

This, fortunately, had been obtained for him without delay through the interest of the vicar of St. Margaret's; and here, with Mummy away and father a memory, he had found himself a little socially securer. Thus it had become possible, almost immediately, to pick and choose between his fellow-clerks—possible, too, until the word clerk began to associate itself with the word twopenny, to extract a certain enjoyment from financial independence.

But alas, quick of ear and eye, he had then begun to detect upon the lips of superior people a certain contempt for clerical workers like himself. And since these were the people to whom undoubtedly he should belong, it had become urgent again to reconsider his position.

There had always been his mother, too, in the background, with her unfortunate lack of social discrimination, and her penchant for people who lived above shops. And while at first he had been too young to protest against this effectively, he was quite old enough to perceive how it must be combated. It must be made so incongruous as to die a natural death. Withdrawing himself, therefore, from his mother's too simple entertainments, he had pleaded study as a pretext, and worked for his

matriculation at the London University—an examination that he passed at the second attempt, not only to his own joy but the vicar's, who had forgotten his Latin, but to whom, nevertheless, he had deemed it wise, sometimes, to appeal for advice.

"A very good lad," the worthy vicar had said, "I coached him, you know, for his London matric.,"—and he had been asked up to supper at the vicarage to celebrate the successful issue.

This vicar had left during the following year, but his successor, a rather pronounced evangelical, had always made a habit of encouraging young men. And Mr. Thompson had become the first-fruits of a similar campaign at St. Margaret's, with a priority that had even fructified to include Mummy—an intimacy broken later on doctrinal grounds, but that had decided him to take holy orders.

Nor would he regret, as he often said, that his earlier inclinations had been so evangelical, since they had afforded him, encouraged by the vicar, such numerous chances of speaking and preaching. And although later it had seemed wiser to identify himself with the larger and more sacerdotal party, he had always very firmly clung to his belief in the power of the Sermon.

"And yet," said Mrs. Thompson, who had become, as usual, a little reminiscent, "I sometimes wonder if you wouldn't have done better to have joined the Congregationalists—what with your B.A. and your preachin'; though of course they 'aven't got quite the same standink."

And alas, how characteristic it was of Mummy to make such a remark as that—poor Mummy, who now lived suspended, as it were, in a lonely, but rather difficult splendour.

"An' what's more," she said, "I see that your vicar's been gettin' into trouble again."

Mr. Thompson cut another slice of bread.

"You mean about the Adoration of the Blesséd Rood?"—he made an instinctive movement with his hand across his breast.

"*Somethink* like that," nodded Mummy. "I didn't quite understand what it meant."

"Oh, it's only a bit of wood," explained Mr. Thompson, "that the old boy brought home with him from France."

"A bit of wood?" puzzled Mummy.

"Well, of course," explained Mr. Thompson, "it's supposed to be a piece of the Cross. Perhaps it is. And anyway it's the idea that's the important thing. But I must say that it seems to me unwise."

Mrs. Thompson looked a little awed.

"But what's he done with it, then?" she inquired solemnly.

"Oh, it isn't the wood, of course. It's the service. It's a pretty enough service, too. You can trust the old boy for that. And our people have taken to it enormously. But there you are. They would have taken to something else quite as well. And it's only put the bishop's back up again."

He paused for a moment, replacing the jam-spoon in the dish.

"And now, they say, he's going to refuse licences to the church."

Mrs. Thompson plunged anxiously to the important heart of the problem.

"But you don't mean that you're—you're goin' to get the sack, Albert?"

Her son frowned.

"Oh, no, nothing like that, of course. But it *does* mean that one—one must consider the future rather carefully."

She came over, and now kissed him unrebuked.

"Poor old boy!" she said, "but I know that you'll come through. Why, just look what a lot you've done already. You'll get a livin' of your own as easy as easy; and become a bishop, you will. I know you will—archbishop."

He smiled up at her.

"And then you shall live in a palace."

She coloured a little.

"With my own boy," she said, and he drew her down to his lips.

Dear old Mummy, she always cheered him, after ~~all~~. And really, when she took pains, she could talk quite nicely. He walked down the Commercial Road with a sprightlier step. He was more at home here, even as he was—unprotected by his cassock; and every now and then some one would salute him, finger to cap. A couple of lady-helpers, too, catching sight of him, crossed the road, and began chatting to him with a very comforting deference. Ah, well—no doubt the present was difficult, and the future, for the moment, a little darker than was agreeable. But what of that? A bishop—an archbishop? Poor little Mummy—and yet—

Half an hour later he was confronting Father Lucy.

"And since I received the letter," said Father Lucy, "I have had a wire to say that my friend has been removed to the Hospital. It appears"—he tapped an open Crockford—"to have come from a Mr. Cossington, the incumbent of Longstone, a neighbouring parish. And he offers to meet you to-morrow at Banner, which seems to be the nearest station."

Then he rose, and with the good fellowship that never failed him, shovelled them all into Mr. Thompson's arms—Crockford, the Railway Guide, the map of Dorset, and the letter.

"Work it out for yourself," he said, as Mr. Thompson retired; and indeed this was, perhaps, his favourite phrase—tempering Authority, as he would sometimes observe, with a reasonable concession to Individual Free-Will.

"Oh, and by the way," he added, "your best train will be the 10.15. And I've sent a wire to this Mr. Cossington."

CHAPTER III

THUS briefly, then, was Mr. Thompson first made cognisant of a gentleman for whom it is now our duty to pray silence—in view not only of his personal distinction as the Rev^d. Algernon Cossington, once of Peterhouse and Ely, but more particularly as the recipient of that incomplete message from Father Lucy which was to prove the source of so much discomfort.

A chance meeting in Switzerland, a little letter of appeal, a too hasty telegram; a schoolboy's scoff, an upcurled lip, a vicarage supper—even singly it would be futile to point out their manifold possibilities; and together, as it is obvious, they might well be responsible for almost anything from an epic to an empire.

"At the same time," observed Mr. Cossington, "it is exceedingly annoying, especially as it's five miles to the station——" He referred again to the telegram. "'Sending Thompson'—and not a word about trains."

"Who *is* Mr. Thompson?" inquired his wife, who had a brother in the sixty-ninth, and was particular about these things.

Mr. Cossington went into his study, and brought back a last year's volume of that valuable directory to which reference has already been made.

"He is not," he observed, "a University man."

"Well," said Mrs. Cossington, "having offered to meet him, and sent a prepaid wire, I *really* think you have done all that could be expected. Of course, if Mr. Pratt had seen fit to consult you earlier, all this trouble would never have arisen. Your brother Arthur would probably have *liked* to take the services, seeing that he is spending his holidays only ten miles off, and is always so fond of his bicycle."

Mr. Cossington stroked his chin.

"That's very true," he said. "I hadn't thought of it. But seeing that Pratt had already written to this Mr. Lucy, and that both Colonel Lincoln Trent and the schoolmaster were away——"

Mrs. Cossington nodded.

"I quite agree with you," she said, "and I think that, considering the very casual way in which Mr. Pratt usually behaves, you have done all that could possibly be expected."

Mr. Cossington looked at his Crockford again.

"Of course," he said, "Pratt's not a University man either."

"Well, my dear," observed his wife, "it doesn't need a Crockford to tell us that, I think. I wonder what Colonel Lincoln Trent will have to say."

Mr. Cossington lifted his plump, pink face in deferent inquiry.

"About having one of Father Lucy's curates," she explained, "planted upon Kilridge."

Mr. Cossington smiled faintly. For while personally, though a sound Churchman, he inclined a little towards the sacerdotal position, Colonel

Lincoln Trent was rather notably opposed to this. It was he, in fact, who was mainly responsible for the extreme austerity of the Kilridge ritual, Mr. Pratt liking ornament a little, but loving peace above all things.

"And where did he meet him, anyway?" pursued Mrs. Cossington. "On that ridiculous visit to Switzerland, I think you said?"

Her husband nodded.

"They stayed in the same hotel," he replied.

"And on the strength of that, I suppose," said Mrs. Cossington, "he thought that he could draw upon him for supplies."

"I believe that he had already tried elsewhere," said her husband, "or at any rate Miss Angela seemed to think so."

"I suppose she has left the servant at home?"

"Oh, yes. It was only the question of getting the new man to Kilridge, and generally giving him some idea of things that seemed to be troubling her."

Mrs. Cossington took a plate, and went over to the window. There is something attractive even in the least human of us. And now she threw some crumbs out to the sparrows. Before her stretched the vicarage lawn, sleek and well-cropped, and guarded by sentinel geraniums. At her left, between the elms, shone a neighbouring hayfield, with a laden waggon creeping slowly to the stack, and above this, nearly two miles away, the still line of the Durling Hills. Below the wall that lifted up the garden from the road, some children unseen were playing in the dust—over whose heads came

rumours of the village that hid them from the sea-coast downs.

"Is he bad?" asked Mrs. Cossington, making little movements with the plate.

"Pratt? I don't know. I gathered from Lennox that it was fluid on the lung of some sort."

"Well, of course," said Mrs. Cossington, coming back from the French window, "I'm very sorry for him. But I *must* say— Here *is* Colonel Lincoln Trent."

And so it was—a lean-faced warrior with a bushy moustache and fierce, consecrated eyes. He lifted his straw hat, but wouldn't sit down, thank you. He had been sorry to have been away for a night at this juncture, and he only wanted to know what had been arranged about to-morrow's services.

"Do you mean," asked Mrs. Cossington, who didn't like the colonel, but knew distant friends of his through her brother in the sixty-ninth, "do you mean to say that Mr. Pratt never consulted you?"

The colonel fenced a little, partly on account of his own personal dignity, and partly owing to some natural doubts as to Mrs. Cossington's salvation.

Mr. Cossington showed him the telegram.

"Of course," he said, "Father Lucy is—er—rather advanced."

The colonel grunted.

"I suppose," he said, "that he'll come down by the 1.30."

"He doesn't say so," pointed out Mrs. Cossington.

"And it seems rather a thankless task," put in her husband, "to send a lame pony ten miles on the chance."

The colonel grinned a little.

"Well, it won't hurt the young man to walk," he supposed. "Is he going to come here first?"

"We *really* don't know," said Mrs. Cossington, who was now dropping some dead nasturtiums into the slop-basin.

"No," said the colonel, "of course not—of course not. Perhaps I'll stroll out a little in the afternoon, and meet him."

Mr. Cossington took a cigarette from a silver box on the mantelpiece.

"I suppose I can't tempt you, colonel," he said, placing it humorously between his own lips. But the colonel shook his head with a little outward thrust of his chin; and down the road, as he did so, came humming a four-cylinder motor-car, driven by a girl with a young chauffeur at her side.

They all knew who she was; and since she was hatless and unveiled, she had obviously just driven down from Windy—that rambling and notorious grange upon the Downs, observed as a mere name by Father Lucy, on the coast between Kilridge and Basin Pool. Since, too, this particular road below their garden would merely conduct her to Wingbarrow Bay, she was presumably on her way thither for a swim—a deduction based on previous observations, and confirmed, less than half an hour later, by the solitary return of the young chauffeur.

Of her person, as the big car ran smoothly past them, they could merely see her face and hair, the latter untidy and the former tanned, a countenance, however, both serene and healthful, and perhaps fortunately unconscious of spectators.

CHAPTER IV

I

HAVING considered, then, the more immediate origins of this mission of Mr. Thompson, it will have been observed that while to Father Lucy it had been little else than a whim, to Father Matthews, to the Rev^d. Algernon and Mrs. Cossington, and to Colonel Lincoln Trent it had already appeared somewhat other than this—a journey of possibilities for instance; a vehicle of annoyance; even a bugle-note of danger. To none of them, however, had it apparently suggested itself as containing any of the food-stuff of drama; and the discovery in it of certain elements of farce was to remain the single-brained achievement of Miss Selina Chote. To this young lady, indeed, and her father, the platform at Banner seemed to be solely consecrated. And to Sir George, at least, who had been pacing it for some twenty minutes, it was already becoming the theatre of an exceedingly justifiable anger.

Clad in a grey bowler hat, a suit of Shetland homespun, and the most polished of boots and gaiters, he was a small man of very ancient lineage and quite limited mental capacity. Thanks, however, to the extent of his acres and the financial genius of his agent, this latter had never seriously incommoded him. And upon the surplus of his

income he even contrived to maintain a horse or two with a trainer across the downs—selling-platers, usually, of a consistently speculative type.

With a rising choler, he transferred his gaze once more from the empty railway-line to the gentle progress of his daughter's black-stockinged legs, about which he now detected a kind of leisurely daintiness that seemed to him peculiarly offensive.

The colour in his red cheeks deepened a little.

"Please don't hurry," he observed politely.

Selina looked towards him, and smiled.

"All right," she murmured obediently.

Sir George glared at her.

"Look here, young woman," he said, "you'll get spanked if you aren't jolly careful."

She regarded him with the grave eyes of fifteen, innocent, yet not unwilling to be instructed.

"Oh, Daddy—not on the platform?"

"Well," he said, "if that's your particular name for it."

There was a moment's pause.

With the toe of her right shoe, she began to draw a pattern in the station dust.

"What did Gregory tell you?" demanded her father.

"He said," quoth Selina, "'tis a 'ard matter to rightly hunderstand, Miss Selina, seeink as 'ow no hinstructions nor nothink 'ave been sent me, Miss Selina. But in my judgment, Miss Selina, which I won't say as it's the gorspel trooth, somethink must 'ave took place, Miss Selina, somewheres atween Stoke Michael an' Bum Regis, a couplink or some-think giv, an' quite himpossible, Miss Selina, tell

your 'onoured pa, to say 'ow much longer th' old train'll be, not leastways until somethink definit 'ave been telephoned through, Miss Selina, an' I'll be pleased to let yer know, Miss Selina, the very minute, or leastways, as the sayin' is, the minute arter——"

The younger Miss Chote permitted this apparently endless monologue to drawl comfortably from her lips after the placid custom both of Mr. Jacob Gregory, the station-master of Banner, and that particular branch of the London and South-Western Railway, whose faithful servant he had been since the day (as it seemed) when all creeping things were made. And she might have proceeded indefinitely, had not her father interrupted her with considerable emphasis.

"Oh, damn it all," he said, "keep your mouth shut."

Selina looked tactfully at her feet. She knew them to be rather pretty because an artist, who had caught her paddling in the bay last week, had asked permission to paint them before she put her stockings on. But at the present moment their neat coverings were thickly powdered with dust. For half a mile on each side of the small space that they occupied upon the platform, stretched the single line of railway—parallel rays of light through this quivering July. A bee from the station-master's petunias drummed gorgeously hivewards. In the opposite meadows the haymakers were napping, wide-mouthed, under their big straw hats; and the church bell, tolling thrice, proclaimed the hour to be a quarter to two.

Now, consideration for other people not being, perhaps, the strongest number in Sir George's repertoire of virtues, it is no doubt a little surprising that he should have tarried here so long. But Mr. Thompson, of Thompson, Thompson, Milliners, New Oxford Street, besides having offered two hundred guineas for the little March filly, possessed a special significance at the moment as a source of stable information—or so Selina, being intelligent, had not unshrewdly guessed.

What she had been told was that Mr. Thompson, who was to have motored from his residence in the north of the county, had wired in the morning to say that he was coming instead by the 1.30 train to Banner; and, please, would Sir George have him met?—to which her twenty minutes' sojourn on the platform had filled in certain lights and shades.

Thus she had gathered that, although her father wasn't at all particular about meetin' these bally shoppies, don't you know, s'long as they were good sportsmen an' all that, he was dashed well not goin' to cool his benighted heels for the best part of an hour waitin' for 'em to turn up at a god-forsaken railway-station. Moreover, at two o'clock there was due to arrive at Windy a very particular lady friend of his in her thirty-forty Panhard; and he was utterly disembodied if he was goin' to keep her waitin' for all the incinerated milliners in the universe. All the same, it was a bally unfortunate nuisance—a certain genius for anti-climax being one of Sir George's chief characteristics.

"You mean," inquired Selina, "about the filly?"

"No, I do *not* mean about the filly," said Sir George. "The filly can wait."

He consulted his watch, and glanced at the car, wherein the chauffeur, head on bosom, was dozing peacefully at his post. Behind him, similarly employed, sat the driver of the Lion bus, perched above his horses.

Selina wrinkled her nose a little.

"Perhaps," she hazarded, "you're trying to get a tip out of him for the 3.30 at Liverpool?"

Sir George glanced at her sharply.

"You know a jolly sight too much, Miss," he said. "That's what's the matter with you."

Selina took the newspaper from his freckled right fist. It was so folded as to expose the latest racing intelligence; and against the entries for the 3.30, Sir George had set a pencil-mark. They read as follows:—The Blue Bird; Punic War; Home Sweet Home; Teddy Bear; and The Benedict. The Blue Bird appeared to be the favourite at seven to four against. Selina frowned.

"But Mr. Jugg," she said, referring to her favourite stable-hand, "Mr. Jugg told me that you were backing The Benedict at four to one against."

"So I was," said her father tartly, "so I am."

"But to-day," read Selina, "The Benedict's fifteen to one against."

"You *do* think you're clever, don't you?" said Sir George. "Read that."

He laid a stubby forefinger on a preceding paragraph, wherein was related the story of a slight accident to The Benedict during a breather upon

the downs taken yesterday afternoon. Another horse, it seemed, had shied at a traction-engine, barging into the unfortunate Benedict, and causing that noble animal to strain a tendon of his right foreleg—or so, at any rate, it had been supposed—a certain amount of swelling becoming subsequently visible. It was only slight, however; compresses had been instantly applied; and both the trainer and the jockey professed themselves satisfied that nothing calamitous need be feared. But the untoward incident had evidently been reflected in the betting; and Sir George, as a consequence, was quite naturally perturbed.

"I suppose," said Selina, "they don't think he's so likely to win."

"Intelligent child!" said her father, "right first time."

"But what's Mr. Thompson got to do with it?" she inquired, "oh, I see; it's Mr. Thompson's horse."

"Wonderful!" ejaculated her father.

"If he's not very bad then," suggested Selina, "you'll perhaps put some more money on him, I suppose?"

"Well, really——" said her father in admiration.

"At fifteen to one?"

He nodded.

"Whereas if he is," he volunteered, "I ought to be hedgin' on somethin' else, don't you see. So now you know *all* about it."

"Couldn't you ring Mr. Thompson up?" asked Selina.

"I did, my dear," said her father patiently,

"but he'd left home. An' now he's stuck up in this infernal train."

"What's the latest you can put your money on?" she inquired.

"Oh, any time up to the start from Longstone Post Office."

He glanced at his watch.

"Look here," he went on, "I'll have to pip back again to meet Lollie—to meet Miss Jameson."

Selina raised her eyes.

"She's somebody new, isn't she?" she asked.

"Never you mind who she is," replied her father.

"You've got to wait here for this bloomin' train, apologise to Mr. Thompson, an' bring him along in the Lion bus there. I'm goin' to cut home in the car."

"I'm very hungry," pointed out Selina.

Her father pulled twopence from his pocket.

"Go an' get some chocolate," he told her.

"You'll survive all right. Your sort always does."

They walked down the platform together, and Sir George, waking the chauffeur, settled himself down in the big car. Selina, sucking her chocolate, watched it dwindling down the white road.

"Lollie Jameson," she murmured wisely, "I wonder if Dad pays for the Panhard."

She turned thoughtfully back to the platform. For since the second Lady Chote had been divorced two years ago (the first had merely disappeared, and afterwards died), Berenice and Bill, the twins, aged twenty-three, and Selina, eight years younger, had always taken a certain filial interest in the succeeding recipients of their father's affection.

And she was still reflecting upon the possibilities of a step-mother called Lollie, when there was a great clanging of the station bell and a simultaneous falling of the signal. The driver of the Lion bus lifted his head with a jerk, and tightened up the reins of his horses, and Mr. Gregory emerged slowly from cover, sweeping the platform with a paternal eye.

" 'Tis a pity," he said to Selina, who was sitting on the booking-office window-sill, " 'tis a pity as Sir George 'ooked it so soon, seein' as she'll be 'ere in 'arf a tick."

" Yes, but you see," agreed Selina, " he had to meet a more important lady at home."

Mr. Gregory permitted himself the cough of a very discreet old age. Far down the line a bubble of smoke proclaimed the delinquent train. The church bell struck twice.

" I shall probably know him," reflected Selina, " by his being a top-hole bounder. And I shall have to talk to him in a beastly bus "—whereas the only passenger that alighted from the train was a rather tall, rather pale young clergyman, whose hair, in Selina's judgment, was about three-quarters of an inch too long.

II

This was the first thing that she noticed; and a more deliberate scrutiny only confirmed the impression. For since the length of hair was never absolute, the deciding factor, in her opinion, became one of motive. Thus the artist, in the bay, for

example, had possessed long hair; but then the rest of him had been illogically untidy throughout, reflecting merely a preoccupied spirit. While, in the present instance, the remainder of the passenger being neat, and his lips and chin very carefully shaven, she could not, in the matter of his hair, altogether acquit him of design. Moreover, he was submitting now to her scrutiny the always interesting spectacle of a person of some importance who should have been met, but has been disappointed—a singularly exacting situation, in which it seems probable that she felt him to be wanting.

It seems probable, but it is here that we must take care to guard ourselves against a certain secretive quality, characteristic of Miss Selina's attitude to her world—a kind of emotional reticence, diligently cultivated, and of great satisfaction to her. Nobody, that was to say, at a given moment, could tell precisely what she did feel—although, as they cheerfully admitted, she was probably the brainy one of the family. In the present case, swallowing the moiety of her sweetmeat, she came forward with just that girlish simplicity which she had so often found particularly effective.

"Mr. Thompson, I presume?" she said.

Now Mr. Thompson, as has perhaps been indicated, was at this moment in the very difficult position of not knowing exactly what to tell the porter. For the little girl with the candid eyes had hitherto shown no great anxiety to claim him; and to admit himself to have been expecting a welcome was to step, as it seemed to him, into a situation of imperfect dignity. While, on the other

hand, to order a conveyance might well cost seven and sixpence. To say, therefore, that his heart now warmed towards Selina would be to understate altogether what happened. It leapt.

"That is my name," he said promptly, and gripped her hand with the utmost vigour.

There was a moment's pause—a brief moment wherein, as she afterwards admitted, she was very nearly completely knocked out; in which connection, however, it is only just to record that neither Alfred the porter nor Mr. Gregory himself, who were both of them standing at attention, perceived in her the least flicker of an eye-lash. For, while it appeared to them both in the highest degree improbable that this traveller could be Sir George's friend, in Selina herself they merely beheld the signs of an almost spiritual gratification.

Nor were they entirely in error, for upon the heels of her first astonishment there had opened out before her a vista of such breathless possibilities that, feeling her hand tremble, she was obliged to withdraw it very gently. Then she steadied herself, speaking with care.

"Father was so sorry not to be able to wait," she explained, "but he had to meet an urgent friend at home."

"Not at all," said Mr. Thompson hurriedly. "I see."

"Your train was late, you know," she pointed out. "I hope you won't mind the bus?"

"Delighted," said Mr. Thompson. "Not a bit. Wasn't it?"

Selina listened to his remarks gravely, over-

looking their somewhat crude incoherence with just the kind of tact that called attention to it. And at the same moment Mr. Thompson dropped his walking-stick, a new one made of cherry-wood, and stooping down too hastily to pick it up, caught his left coat-sleeve upon the edge of his trunk, and displayed several inches of whiteness. Selina waited until he had readjusted himself, met his rather too pronounced smile with a very graceful one of her own, and then spoke quietly to the porter.

"We shall go home on the bus, Alfred," she said, "if you wouldn't mind helping up with Mr. Thompson's luggage."

The rubicund driver of the bus regarded them with visible curiosity.

"Blarst me," he murmured to himself. "'Oo-ever 'ave she picked up now?"

"To Windy," said Selina, before committing herself to the interior.

Then Mr. Thompson, whose satisfaction at being appropriated had been followed by a somewhat inexplicable sense of annoyance, began to make some conversation.

"That's a curious name, isn't it?" he asked.

"It's the name of our house," said Selina.

"Didn't you know?"

Mr. Thompson shook his head.

"I know nothing," he said, "except that your father's telegram came from Longstone."

She looked at him carefully.

"That is a village near," she said.

"It's very pretty country," observed Mr. Thompson, regarding it with a superficial eye.

"I'm glad you like it," said Selina politely.

Mr. Thompson looked round at her rather sharply, stimulated by something in her voice that even practice had not quite enabled her to smother. But he perceived no more in her face than the flush of a respectful curiosity; and after all, he reflected, she was merely a little girl, though of a somewhat unfamiliar kind.

He smiled again, balancing himself carefully between assurance and affability.

"I hope that your father hasn't put himself out in any way," he said.

"No," said Selina. "Father never does that."

The bus jolted over a stone.

"It occurred to me in the train," pursued Mr. Thompson, after a slight pause, "that I ought, perhaps, to have wired to him again—confirming the time of my arrival."

Selina's attitude suggested the quieter kind of interest.

"I couldn't remember, you see, for certain, whether Father Lucy had mentioned it or not. But I never thought about it till we had passed Basingstoke."

"Really?" said Selina.

"Do you live far from the village?" he inquired.

"About half a mile."

"And how far is that from Kilridge?"

"That is the village," said Selina patiently.

Mr. Thompson smiled again.

"But I thought that Longstone was your village?"

"So it is," said Selina; "but it's not the nearest one."

Mr. Thompson relapsed into silence; and it was at that moment that they met a spare, unsmiling figure marching resolutely down the dusty road. As the bus passed him he stopped suddenly and turned round, raking them with so stern an inquiry that he seemed, indeed, about to order them to halt. Upon second thoughts, however, not unconnected apparently with Selina, he appeared to reconsider this decision; and instead, at an increasing distance, turned himself about, and began marching behind them.

Selina stared blandly in front of her.

"It's a little curious, isn't it," reverted Mr. Thompson, "for the vicar to live nearer another village than his own?"

"Does he?" asked Selina.

Mr. Thompson turned rather red.

"I thought you said," he repeated, "that you lived nearer Kilridge than Longstone?"

"So we do," said Selina; "two and a half miles nearer."

"Well then——" said Mr. Thompson.

Selina looked faintly puzzled. And Mr. Thompson was now obviously blushing.

"You—you aren't Miss Pratt by any chance?" he said.

"Oh, no," said Selina, and it was then that Mr. Thompson discovered himself to have forgotten the name upon the telegram. He made a determined onslaught upon his retreating social ease.

"Have you heard how he is to-day?" he asked.

"Who?" inquired Selina.

"Mr. Pratt."

" You mean the vicar ? "

" Certainly I do."

Selina shook her head. The Chotes as a family did not move in ecclesiastical circles.

" I'm afraid I haven't," she said. Then she took her only false step.

" Is he ill ? " she inquired gently.

Mr. Thompson opened his eyes.

" Haven't you heard ? " he asked.

" Not a word," said Selina.

" Gone to the hospital," explained Mr. Thompson, " yesterday."

" Oh, bad luck ! " murmured Selina.

" That's why I'm here, you know," said Mr. Thompson ; " to take his place for a while."

" Oh, I see," she said.

" And that's why I was naturally interested," he went on, " in learning that your father lived nearer Mr. Pratt's village than his own."

" But they're both his own," said Selina.

" You mean that Kilridge is a—a sort of chapel of ease to Longstone ? I hadn't gathered that from Crockford."

" I'm afraid," said Selina, " that I don't know Mr. Crockford. But, of course, there *is* a chapel at Kilridge—where Mr. Jugg goes. He's a Baptist."

" And who is Mr. Jugg ? " inquired Mr. Thompson.

" My favourite stable-man," said Selina.

" Stable-man ? "

" One who works in or about stables," explained Selina ; " but perhaps it's a local idiom."

" Oh, no, I don't think it is," smiled Mr. Thompson, ' putting her down a little,' as he phrased it.

"We have a good many in my own parish—in the parish where I work, rather."

"Are you only a curate then?" asked Selina, in a tone of half-incredulous disappointment.

"Er—well," said Mr. Thompson, "we generally say Assistant Priest."

"Is that something better?" she inquired.

Mr. Thompson opened his mouth once or twice.

"I suppose your father doesn't keep one," he suggested.

"No," said Selina. "I sometimes wish he did."

They took the bend of the road that leads seaward from the Durling Hills to Windy; and on their right, as they turned, they could see now the long declivity of land that leads down through Milestone and Longstone to the sickle of Wingbarrow Bay. It was their first view of the Channel, a gleam of smoky blue, that quivered, some four miles away, in a little chalice of green. A mile nearer, from a cluster of cottages, uprose the squat spire of a church, with a grey house, barred by elm-trunks, half revealed at its side.

"That's Longstone," said Selina, nodding her head.

"And who lives next the church?" asked Mr. Thompson.

"The vicar," said Selina briefly.

Mr. Thompson stared at her.

"But aren't you—isn't your father the vicar?"

Selina lifted her eyebrows ever such a little.

"Oh, no," she said, "only the squire."

Mr. Thompson made a movement with his hand.

"Now I *see*," he cried. "I thought somehow that we had been talking at cross-purposes all along."

They both laughed rather merrily, Mr. Thompson stopping first. And to Selina, with a slightly anxious eye cocked for the white gate of Windy, it seemed that he was beginning to go back a little over their late conversation.

"It's very good of your father," he said at last, "to take such an interest in me."

"Oh, not at all," said Selina. "Father's a very affectionate man."

They swung round between the laurels and along the drive. A big car with a yellow body purred softly past them on its way towards the garage.

"Lollie's," she reflected, with a slight tickle in her inside. They drew up at the stone steps.

III

And here, upon the brink of a somewhat painful incident, let us anticipate, if we may, the criticism of discerning students, that they have been led from a region of apparent truth into one of the sheerest mockery. And without making any defence, let us ask, at least, that the blame may be rightly apportioned—not to the facts, as they indeed occurred, but rather to the shortcomings of the narrative, that has endeavoured to see them through the eyes of Selina but has failed, perhaps, as easily it might, to clothe them with her convincingness.

"You're sure," said Mr. Thompson suspiciously, "you're sure that this is all right?"

A man in a black coat ran down the steps towards them. Selina took a deep breath.

"Absolutely," she said, "unless——"

She regarded him with obvious horror.

"You *are* Mr. Thompson, I suppose?"

"Of course I am."

Mr. Thompson intercepted an exchange of glances between the footman and the driver of the bus. So did Selina.

"It's about your trunk," she said quickly. "Perhaps it had better go down to the vicarage. I suppose you're staying at the vicarage?"

"I suppose so," said Mr. Thompson slowly. "At any rate, your father will know."

"Yes," said Selina. "Drive Mr. Thompson's trunk to the vicarage, Willis."

The bus-driver touched his hat.

At the top of the steps the footman hesitated, glancing in obvious uneasiness from Mr. Thompson to Selina. From an adjoining room came a sudden sound of voices, the popping of a cork, and a shrill peal of laughter—an effort presumably of Miss Lollie Jameson.

"I'm afraid we're a little late for lunch," said Selina. "He wants your hat and stick."

Then a door behind Mr. Thompson opened, and an attractive maid-servant hurried past them, bearing a small pile of empty dishes; and affording to Sir George, who was now in view, a posterior glimpse of his visitor.

"Ah, good business," he shouted, "they've turned up after all."

A glance at the clock showed the time to be

twenty minutes short of three. He rose from his seat, and moved round the table.

"How are you, Mr. Thompson?" he called out, his voice breaking a little, as it always did under the stress of any sudden emotion. And it was then, as her family circle received simultaneously its first full dose of Mr. Thompson, that Selina began to come into her kingdom. For nothing quite like this had ever happened, she supposed, in Windy before—like this vision of Mr. Thompson flung suddenly across a heated argument about the betting on the 8.80. She could almost hear her own heart beating in the complete silence that now befell—her brother frozen with his napkin half-way to his lips, Ponsonby a statue poised above the joint, and her father, with bulging eyes, a pillar of salt, or at any rate mustard. But her voice, she was sure, never wavered in the least.

"This is my father, Mr. Thompson," she said. "Father, this is Mr. Thompson."

Her father remained paralysed.

"Our new Assistant Priest, you know," explained Selina.

"N' n' new what?" stammered Sir George.

"Assistant Priest," said Selina distinctly. She waved her hand towards the others.

"My brother Bill, Mr. Thompson," she proceeded, "Mr. Richard Bolton, the celebrated politician of Stack, Mam'zelle Boulet, my dear French governess, and—the other lady I haven't yet been introduced to myself."

The tension was now, perhaps, almost supernatural, and the colour of Sir George's cheeks

positively frightening. Instinctively Selina faded slightly into a strategic position between Mr. Thompson and the door.

"Oh, *mon Dieu!*" cried the governess, "*mon Dieu!*"

And it was then that Bill, whose manners were admittedly this outcast family's crudest—it was then that Bill, leaning back, uttered one hoarse bellow to the ceiling; following which, as raindrops after thunder, the great tears coursed down his face.

Sir George stared fiercely round.

"Look here," he began, "what the dev——?" and then suddenly caught sight of Ponsonby.

"Damn you, Ponsonby," he shouted, "why the devil can't you get on with your work?"

"Oh, *mon Dieu, mon Dieu!*" said the governess.

Mr. Thompson turned to Sir George, and it would have been hard to say which of them was the redder. Never since he was a schoolboy—and indeed at this moment he felt extraordinarily like one—had Mr. Thompson found himself so intolerably the plaything of a humiliating fortune.

"I can see," he said unsteadily, "that there has been some mistake."

Sir George gaped at him blankly.

"My name is Thompson," he continued.

"Tut—Thompson," repeated Sir George.

"He was the only one there was," put in Selina.

And it seems probable that her intervention became the safety valve of her father's sanity.

"Go to bed," he shouted. "Go upstairs, and go straight to bed. Pup—Ponsonby, take Miss Selina to bed."

"Oh, *mon Dieu!*" cried the governess again, rising hastily towards her pupil.

"You were not expecting me?" said Mr. Thompson.

Sir George recovered himself with an effort.

"I'm afraid my daughter—ah—has misled you, Mr. Thompson," he said heavily. "I was expectin'—ah—a Mr. Thompson, but——"

Selina let herself go.

"He was only a damned milliner," she shouted from the staircase.

"Pup—Ponsonby," said Sir George, "will you kindly shut the door?"

"He was to give us a tip," shouted Selina, "about the 3.30 at Liverpool."

Mr. Thompson began to collect himself.

"Then, if you'll excuse me——" he said stiffly.

But at this point Bill sat up again, gasping, and wiping his eyes.

"Oh, Lord, no," he said, "you've got to stop and feed. You must really—eh, what?"

He cast a glance round the table.

Sir George stammered a little, trying to be appropriate.

"Of course he must," shouted Bill. "Ponsonby, lay a place for Mr. Thompson."

He rose to his gaitered legs, and extended a vast hand across the table.

"Never forgive you if you don't," he said, "eh, what, Pater?"

Sir George swallowed once or twice.

"No," he said at last, "certainly not."

"Little beast," said Bill, "she's always playin'

that sort of game. I say, though, it was damned funny—what? You bein' Thompson too, don't you know? Eh, what, Miss Jameson? Damned funny it was. F'give my swearin'."

Mr. Thompson hesitated, but Bill, who had come round behind him, pressed him forcibly into a vacant chair beside Miss Jameson.

"I'm really extremely sorry," said Mr. Thompson.

"Oh, not at all, not at all," said Sir George, glancing uneasily at Miss Jameson. "It's—ah—we—ah—who ought to apologise, don't you know?"

But by now, with the tension relaxed, Mr. Thompson had realised himself once more, and was busy mustering his defences under Bill's hospitable eyes and the somewhat cooler observation of the other young man—the prospective Unionist candidate, as he was afterwards to learn, and the heir of the famous Mr. Bolton of Creel. At the same moment, too, Bill, obviously pleased at having thought of it, suggested that Mr. Thompson, bein' a parson, an' all that sort of thing—what?—that Mr. Thompson would no doubt like to offer up grace?

Upon which Mr. Thompson glancing round, and suddenly remembering his voice—reflecting also, that under the circumstances the only victory could be to the bold, lifted his hand, and became at once easy and impressive.

"Benedictus, benedicat," he said solemnly—and indeed, if a second and even, profounder silence might be regarded as a personal tribute, it was accorded to him with an almost startling abruptness. For lo, now, he beheld all these

strange people staring at him, not only without a smile, but in the case of Sir George and his son, with an almost superstitious credulity.

Then Sir George bent forward a little.

"Bub—beg your pardon," he asked reverently, "but would you mind sayin' that once more?"

It was an unusual request, and Mr. Thompson experienced a very natural hesitation. But even with awakened eyes he could detect no traces of humour in Sir George's still heated countenance—only a kind of anxious wonder, a little puzzling to account for.

"Benedictus, benedicat," he repeated.

Then Sir George and his son exchanged awe-stricken glances; and together looked once more at Dick. For although, in their own line of knowledge, they were no doubt sufficiently expert, they had now been confronted with a phenomenon that transcended all previous experience. In this emergency, then, their almost instinctive reference to Dick may be looked upon as related to homage; and, indeed, when necessary, the Chotes never hesitated to salute a superior intellect.

"I say," said Bill, therefore, "what about that, Dick—what?"

"Good enough, eh?" inquired Sir George.

It was the first time that this other guest had spoken—a young man, apparently, of a more calculating habit.

"All right," he advised. "Chance it. Why not?"

Sir George turned to Mr. Thompson with respect.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, "but it's really rather important."

Mr. Thompson bowed; and Ponsonby was sent for a telegraph form.

"What for you?" inquired Sir George of his son.

"Fiver," said Bill.

Dick Bolton nodded.

"All right," he agreed, "same here."

"What beautiful country this is," observed Mr. Thompson to his neighbour.

"Eh?" said Miss Jameson, startled. "Oo—yes—toppin'"—which may be accepted, perhaps, as fairly typical of her usual conversational vocabulary.

IV

And it was at this point that there lounged up from the lawn that same rather large young woman observed by Colonel Trent and the Cossingtons. She had returned, as it appeared, from her swim, on foot and at her own leisure; and now, leaning tranquilly over the window-sill, she surveyed the luncheon party inside without visible emotion. She spoke with an agreeable, but rather a lazy voice.

"I've just brought a wire," she announced, "a wire from Mr. Thompson."

Bill grinned, half turning in his chair.

"Here *is* Mr. Thompson," he said, "what? Mr. Thompson—my sister Berenice; usually known as Barker."

Mr. Thompson bowed, staring at her, perhaps,

just a trifle too pointedly. For while to her brother Bill she appeared to exhibit a personality not particularly striking, to his own finer and more educated eye she was obviously a very beautiful young woman—more than possibly, indeed, as it seemed to him, the most beautiful young woman in the world. . . .

“How do you do?” she nodded gravely.

“This is Miss Jameson,” said Sir George.

“How do you do?” she said in precisely the same tone of quite friendly and untroubled acquiescence.

“Have you fed?” inquired Bill thoughtfully.

“I took some sandwiches with me,” she explained.

“I see,” said Sir George, over the telegram, “that the feller’s had to go up to town.”

“Did you do it?” asked Bill, going on with his beef.

Berenice yawned.

“Yes,” she said.

“Good old Barker,” said Bill, with his mouth full.

“Do what?” inquired Dick.

“Swim round Wingbarrow Nob,” said Bill.

“But I don’t believe that she did.”

She lifted herself on to the window-sill, and swung across it two bare brown ankles.

“All right,” she said, “go and ask the coast-guard. And give me one of those apples.”

It was Dick who threw her the apple, and the sight of this, with the presence of Mr. Thompson, seemed to stir some sudden reminiscence from the vaguer depths of Bill’s past.

"Ought to have been the other way round—eh, what?"

Mr. Thompson didn't quite understand.

"Eve, you know," explained Bill with complacency.

Berenice set her teeth into the apple.

"Don't show off," she said, and nodded again to Mr. Thompson. "He doesn't know anythin' about it," she added, "not really. I don't suppose he's ever looked at that part at all."

"What part?" inquired Bill.

"Genesis."

"Ah," said Bill, "that's just where you make your error. Genesis is just the part I did read."

"Yes," said Berenice, "but only the excitin' bits of it."

Once again Mr. Thompson coloured a little, while Bill, admitting himself to have been, at any rate, partially defeated, began to consult his big silver watch.

"Look herc," he observed genially to Mr. Thompson, "you'll jolly well have to hang around, you know, till we hear about the bloomin' Benedict."

"What Benedict?" asked Mr. Thompson, still staring at Berenice. It was the first time that he had spoken since she had come into the room, and he saw at once in her that little access of surprise to which a lifetime with his own voice had accustomed him.

"He gave us the tip, you know," explained Bill to his sister. "'Benedictus benedicat'—at fifteen to one."

And this time it was with more than shame that

the blood beat in Mr. Thompson's cheeks. For it had seemed to him that with the coming of Berenice this spirit of Farce, of which, thanks to Selina, he had become the undeserving sport, had been exorcised at last; that it had somehow ceased to be congruous; and that to her at least he had appeared as to the young ladies who clustered round him at St. Ninian's. Yet, behold, it had dropped him deeper than ever.

"Don't be a fool," said Berenice to her brother.

Bill turned to Mr. Thompson.

"But I say though," he said, "you've never told us *your* startin' price."

"I'm here," said Mr. Thompson coldly, "to represent Mr. Pratt."

"He's runnin' the church for little Pratt," repeated Bill, "and the kid brought him along by mistake."

Sir George and Miss Jameson had already retired from the table.

"I'll trot you round the stables," said Bill, "and then run you down in the car."

"But I fancy," said Mr. Thompson, "that I'm expected at Longstone."

"Why Longstone?" asked Bill.

"I had a wire from the vicar there."

"Cossington?" said Bill.

"That was the name," said Mr. Thompson, "I have been trying to remember it."

Bill whistled a bar of music.

"He's got a brother-in-law in the sixty-ninth," he observed cryptically, with a leisurely wink at Berenice.

And thus it was that somewhere about half-past four, the Benedict having secured a remarkable victory, Mr. William Chote of Windy drew up before Longstone Vicarage.

“No, I won’t come in,” he said, as Mr. Thompson descended, and began backing again for the return journey—but not so hurriedly that two elderly persons, from between the meshes of the harbour, were unable to observe his movements with a considerable amount of detail.

CHAPTER V

I

Now if Time, as we have recently been reminded, be indeed a mere idol of language, it would be superfluous to point out that between yesterday afternoon in the Sulgrave Road and to-day before Longstone Vicarage there already lay something more than merely twenty-four hours. How much more, however, would still remain relevant; and as Mr. Thompson paused there, for a moment, his hand on the front-door knocker, he may justly be described as rather bruised and breathless. .

Moreover, apart from the fact that Selina had grossly deceived him, he could not detect in his own conduct any single justification for his treatment—a treatment that no subsequent hospitality could redeem either from ribaldry or patronage. For now, staring balefully after Bill, he was beginning to review these people from a clearer standpoint; beginning, too, if alas a little tardily, to perceive them in their real relationships—his inferiors in every important particular; mere Hottentots in their attitude to his office, and bushmen in their ignorance of St. Ninian's. So damn them—yes, damn them every one; for even Berenice, by now, was probably chuckling over his earlier discomfiture.

He knocked fiercely at the door—a rather ill-bred knock, as Mrs. Cossington at once observed, for all that he had been driven down here by the future master of Windy.

“D’you suppose he’s a friend of theirs?” she asked her husband. For the Chotes had never called upon Mrs. Cossington, although, as the vicar’s wife, she had deemed it her duty, after a considerable interval, to leave a visiting-card at their abode. After all, as she had very rightly said, it is quite possible to be too conventional; and in the absence of a Lady Chote, Miss Berenice might easily have overlooked them. But the call had never been returned. Parochial affairs were conducted by the agent; and the hospitality of Windy had never yet been extended to either of them. Not that they minded, of course; and indeed, considering the house’s reputation, it was really extremely doubtful if they could have seen their way to accept it.

“I see—er,” said Mr. Cossington pleasantly, “that you have been getting a lift in our neighbour’s car.”

“Sugar?” inquired Mrs. Cossington.

“No thank you,” said Mr. Thompson. “Yes. I’ve been lunching with them.”

“Are they old friends of yours?” asked Mr. Cossington.

Mr. Thompson looked at him intelligently. For there are some people with whose outlook, for obvious reasons, we become almost instantly familiar, though it is a little disheartening, perhaps, that Mr. Cossington should be among them.

"No," he said slowly, "we happened to meet at the station."

"I was so sorry," said Mr. Cossington, "to have been unable to send for you. But you quite understand——"

"Oh quite," said Mr. Thompson. "It was very thoughtless of me not to have wired myself."

"It is always best, isn't it?" said Mrs. Cossington. "You are not used to country life, perhaps?"

"No, I'm afraid not," smiled Mr. Thompson.

"I suppose," said Mrs. Cossington, "they were meeting the train?"

Mr. Thompson nodded.

"Sir George," he said, "and the youngest child."

"She is thought to be rather pretty," said Mrs. Cossington.

Mr. Thompson was silent.

"And they drove you up?" asked Mr. Cossington.

"Yes," said Mr. Thompson.

"In the bus, I think," said Mr. Cossington. "A friend of ours, Colonel Lincoln Trent, happened to meet you on the road."

"Indeed."

"I suppose they chartered it to meet the train?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Thompson.

"Nobody else going up, eh?" asked Mr. Cossington carelessly.

Mr. Thompson shook his head.

"I believe they were expecting a friend," he said, "who didn't arrive."

"Ah, and they brought you along instead?"

"They always pride themselves, you know," said Mrs. Cossington, "on their free and easy hospitality."

"They are certainly very hospitable," said Mr. Thompson. He turned to Mr. Cossington. "It must be a great help to you in your work here," he said.

Mrs. Cossington held out her hand for his tea-cup, and Mr. Cossington, a little pinker, held his to his lips.

"You haven't met Pratt, I suppose?" he inquired.

"Never," said Mr. Thompson.

"Ah—a good little man," said Mr. Cossington. "Not a University man, of course, which is rather a pity."

"A very *great* pity," said Mrs. Cossington.

There was a moment's pause. A cool air from the hayfield strayed gently over the tea-table.

"Will you have another sandwich?" asked Mr. Cossington.

Mr. Thompson declined it.

"Then perhaps," said Mr. Cossington, "you would like to be strolling back to Kilridge."

Mrs. Cossington came too; and on the way there were explained to Mr. Thompson such points about the parish as Mr. Cossington thought that he might find useful, though of course, as Mr. Thompson must understand, he spoke quite unofficially. He would no doubt hear all further particulars from the churchwarden, Colonel Lincoln Trent, who had unfortunately been away from home when poor Pratt was taken worse.

"By the way," he said, as they parted some

half a mile from Kilridge, "are you Oxford or Cambridge?"

"I am neither," said Mr. Thompson, with a rather forced smile.

Mr. and Mrs. Cossington exchanged glances.

"I am London," said Mr. Thompson.

They both became suddenly considerate.

"Oh, really," said Mr. Cossington.

"How interesting!" said Mrs. Cossington.

"Where *is* that exactly?" asked Mr. Cossington.

"I believe the examinations there are very difficult, are they not?" inquired Mrs. Cossington.

"Well, good-evening," said Mr. Cossington, "and I hope you will be fairly comfortable."

He waved a friendly walking-stick, and Mr. Thompson lifted his hat. Then he turned wrathfully, under a stony blue sky, down the dusty road to Kilridge.

Half an hour later Ann Byng was knocking at his bedroom door. From her wizened, rather melancholy face had shone out upon him the one friendly spirit that had seemed as yet to beckon him from this strange world into which he had been thrust. And now she told him that when he was ready, Colonel Lincoln Trent would like to speak to him in the study; where presently he recognised the pedestrian of the Banner road.

"How d'you do?" said the colonel, gripping his hand with a ferocity that made him wince. "I'm Pratt's churchwarden."

"It's very kind of you to come," said Mr. Thompson.

"It was my duty," said the colonel.

Mr. Thompson drew his cigarette-case from his pocket.

"Will you smoke?" he asked.

The colonel blinked rapidly.

"Thanks," he said, "I am a non-smoker on principle."

Mr. Thompson replaced the cigarette-case in his pocket. The colonel sat down, still raking Mr. Thompson with questioning eyes.

"There are in this parish," he continued, "including the hamlet of Stack and the outlying farms, about three hundred souls."

He accented the last word.

"So I gathered," said Mr. Thompson.

"But at present," went on the colonel, "that number is augmented by visitors staying in the village, to many of whom, no doubt"—he stuck out his chin a little—"our services are extremely dull."

"Oh, really?" said Mr. Thompson in a deprecating voice.

"Both Pratt and myself, you see," said the colonel, "believe in simplicity. And we believe also that we have Scriptural authority for this."

Mr. Thompson bowed.

"The plain gospel," pursued the colonel, "is good enough for us."

Mr. Thompson bowed again.

"Salvation by faith," said the colonel pointedly, "without any trappings."

There was a slight pause.

"We do not turn to the east," he continued, "and we have a prayer before the sermon."

"I shall certainly remember," said Mr. Thompson.

"I thought," said the colonel, "that I had better be quite clear about all this. Because I believe you are accustomed to a rather different—er——"

"Ritual," suggested Mr. Thompson.

There was another silence for a moment.

"You must feel it a great responsibility to have sole charge like this," suggested the colonel.

"Of course," said Mr. Thompson, "there is always a responsibility."

"But a blessed opportunity," said the colonel, "for winning souls to light."

Mr. Thompson was silent again.

The colonel pulled out his watch.

"I have just five minutes," he said, "if you would care for a word of prayer."

Mr. Thompson stared at him a little blankly. For, with the unfailing instinct that all these people seemed to possess, the colonel, too, had winged his barb to an unprotected corner of his economy.

"I'm afraid," he began, "that extemporary petition——"

And so, in the end, it was the colonel who prayed to Mr. Thompson's very genuine amen.

II

"He always does that," said Ann Byng, who had inadvertently interrupted them, but retired with tact.

Mr. Thompson lifted the cover from the supper-dish.

“ And do you always make omelettes as delicious as this ? ” he smiled.

But afterwards, when the physical stimulus of a well-cooked meal had waned a little, the clouds began to sink again upon his spirit. He opened the door, and went out into the little garden, with these bleak uplands rolling away on all sides of it. He saw them rising, indeed, so ghostly in the dusk that now they assumed for him an almost personal significance—as though they themselves had been the actual waves, upon which, all day long, he had been tossed; withdrawn now, but only for a moment, and already sombre for some possible return.

There came up to him, too, as he listened, the new note, not very far off, of the sea-tide beating upon the shore—deliberately, like a pendulum that, as it were, measured the silence; like the ticking by a great clock of some larger time. And at the sound of it he felt suddenly homesick, for St. Ninian's, for Poplar, even for Mummy—for anybody who had seen him as he ought really to be seen; in the pulpit, or upon the altar steps.

Then, pulling himself together, he took stock of his position. Where the colonel lived he did not quite know. But Longstone and Windy lay respectively to west and east of him, and were still, perhaps, tittering in the darkness.

So resolutely he turned back again to the house with this one thing, at least, clear in his mind—that from now onwards they must none of them find in him any further occasion for laughter.

CHAPTER VI

WINGBARROW, Kilridge, and Driver Head; Windy, and Basin Pool—the sea-water sings in their names; and the downs that roll between them are wind-clipped and empty of habitation. Behind them, in a country of thin hedges and stone-walled fields, lie the three hamlets, Longstone, Milestone, and Stack, strung out along the foot of the Durling Hills. And above them, pushed up into the clearest air in England, rise the Durling Hills themselves—a ten-mile battlement midway between the curving Channel and the great estuary behind.

Sprung from their northern slope, too, and looked down upon, this Sunday afternoon, by two men who had just climbed to the crest, rise the deep plantations of Creel—flowing down to that old Jacobite house, with its dovecote and its chapel, and the sunk lawns where the peacocks cry.

Out of the age that conceived it, like some grey cavalier, it stands sentinel over the harsh wilderness beyond—a land of swamp and heather intersected by little tributaries of the estuary, like slashings of silver on a purple robe. It must be six miles broad, a bleak range of unprofitable country; but to-day, and seen from above, it lay shimmering there like satin, discarded or just

slipped unawares from the rich bosom of the pastures beyond. Then the bishop, stooping suddenly, picked a small flower at his feet.

"And look here," he said, "the least yellow trefoil in the blessed old middle of it all."

They turned seaward, squatting down upon the grass, and brooding over the sparser coast-line country—the three hamlets far below; the disappearing cleft of Kilridge, running down to its little bay; and above it, the stunted oaks of Windy, with the white roads, like hat-ribbons, blowing out of them over the cliffs—the one down to Kilridge, and the other across Driver Head to the abrupt brim of Basin Pool; while upon a third, pencilled straight inland, crawled a yellow motor-car, like a beetle through the dust.

"And Chote," said Mr. Bolton grimly, "Chote with his latest mistress."

"Poor Chote," said the bishop, "and the English Channel."

They lifted their eyes again to the horizon, so vague here, between sea and sky, as to suggest a distance less of space than being, wherein a sail or two hung motionless, outside geography, in some phantasmal world of their own.

"Or the only real one?" queried the bishop, a lean man, with merry, mystical eyes, twinkling out beneath an old straw hat.

"The only real what?" asked his companion—more elderly and precise than the other, but with a clear-cut, sensitive face.

"World," said the bishop.

"How do you mean?" asked Mr. Bolton.

The bishop, still holding the little flower, stretched his hand towards the fishing-boats in the sky.

"In between the things that we can analyse—the sky that drops us and the sea that drowns us; the mirages to which we set our sails."

The tuff-tuff of the tiny motor-car came climbing up to them with lilliputian importance.

"Including Chote?" asked Mr. Bolton.

The bishop nodded.

"Including Chote," he said, "and the young lady in the bright pink hat."

"And you a bishop——" grumbled Mr. Bolton.

"Well," smiled the bishop, "why should bishops be left out?"

"Is the church a mirage?"

"I wonder now," said the bishop.

He rolled over upon the grass, looking seriously at his companion; but then began once more to smile.

"Hullo!" he cried, "we're just going to quarrel again, are we?"

He scrambled to his feet, brushing the pollen from his clothes.

"But not in these trousers," he said.

For they had quarrelled, these two, ever since they could remember; and in spite of the life-long affection that lay deeper, Mr. Bolton had opposed his friend's appointment to the see with all the influence that he could wield—not merely as the master of Creel and perhaps the chief landowner in the county, but as one of the most dominant personalities of the English Church Union. Its prophet, indeed, he had often been called, believing as he

did, without any reservation, that it was not only the strongest existing outpost of tradition, but the chief weapon evoked by a corroding modernism—a sword to be used with both hands unsparingly against a crippling phase of ecclesiastical *laissez-aller*.

Apart from this, he was a first-class historical scholar, an authority on Byzantine art, and a quite competent rider to hounds. It was just this catholicity of taste, too, as he frankly recognised, that kept his world so satisfactorily full, and his judgment at any rate reasonably sane; that had enabled him to bless his daughter in her marriage with a struggling sculptor; and to resign Dick, on temperamental grounds, to a separate establishment at Stack. But while, within its limits, it made thus for the fine management of life, as the true son of a historical church he could only oppose it to the uttermost when it encroached either upon doctrinal belief or pontifical conduct. And for the very liberalism in his friend that made him so easy a companion he had condemned him, with all his vehemence, as a possible bishop. That his protest, backed up by the common knowledge of their intimacy, had not been without weight he knew very well. But other considerations had intervened, and in the end he had been overborne, not without profound regret, though with no trace of animosity, and at least a half-glimmer of hope.

"You're not the right man," he had said, "but perhaps the place will make you so," and "Amen," the new bishop had replied, "Amen to that with all my heart."

"And besides," he added now, as they went

down the hill, "I'm doing penance to-day for poor little Pratt."

"Why penance?" smiled Mr. Bolton. "And why Pratt?"

"Penance, because I didn't realise, I'm afraid, how seedy he was. And Pratt, because Kilridge is the only church in Durling that I haven't yet rounded up."

He sighed.

"A month's holiday," he went on, "and this'll be my twelfth service in mufti; twelve sermons that said more for the Christianity of the congregations than I had ever even dared to dream about; twenty-four lessons read variously from the incoherent mutter of low delirium through an ascending series of well-bred monotones to a kind of despairing tenor with a break at each full stop; and prayers innumerable thrown nonchalantly to the Almighty, to be picked up, apparently, more or less as He chose."

He stared gloomily down the road.

"And good fellows, too, for the most part," he added, "as far as a chance listener can judge."

"You didn't reveal yourself, then?"

"Not always. I'm on a holiday, you know, and correspondence is not being forwarded."

"You should have come to Creel this morning."

"Ah, but I know Creel quite well. And duty called me to Banner."

"Well," said Mr. Bolton, "and what's wrong with Banner?"

"Lots of sincerity," said the bishop, "but no actor-manager."

Mr. Bolton frowned a little.

"I don't think it's actor-managers that we want," he said.

"Oh, I don't know," mused the bishop, "I'm not so sure about that. But I know what you mean—a gentleman in every village, don't you know, with an accent on the first syllable. There's one of 'em at Longstone; and he nearly broke my heart."

He turned impulsively to his friend.

"You must forgive me, Reggie dear," he said, "but it's been boiling over for a month, and your, is the only lap that I could spill it in," he pulled off his straw hat, and carried it in his hand, "and now let's pray for grace," he added, "before we get to the high-road."

But in the doctor's little garden at Kilridge the subject rose up once more, Miss Sary, as she was called, poising a lump of sugar over the bishop's tea-cup. She was an exceedingly plain, resolute person, with short grey hair and redeeming eyes, and had kept house for her brother Humphrey ever since he had left his hospital. Dr. Lennox himself came in as she poised.

"Well," she said, looking at him, "which is it?"

"Boy."

She dropped the sugar into the bishop's tea, and handed it to him with bony brown fingers.

"He made me realise, anyway," she proceeded, "what an instrument it might be for tooning up uneducated emotions."

"Who's that?" asked the doctor, sitting down.

"The noo parson-boy," said his sister, "who's doing locum for Pratt."

The bishop leaned forward, and helped himself to some bread and butter.

"And I take it," he smiled, "that you're a little suspicious of the emotions?"

"We're not mystics," said Miss Sary, "if that's what you mean."

"But you've discovered the liturgy?" put in Mr. Bolton.

Miss Sary nodded, munching a rock cake.

"M'm," she said, "re-discovered it, you might say. For I've wept floods over it in my time. Fact. Haven't I, Humphrey?"

"She loved a curate," explained Dr. Lennox, "somewhere in the early nineties. But her physical appearance was rather too much for him."

The bishop leaned back in his chair, his keen eyes dancing from one to the other. He had never met either before. But the brother, he knew, superintended the ailments of Creel.

"He had a very strong sense of beauty, you see," continued Miss Sary, "but only a superficial one. That's why he jibbed."

"But not before," pursued Mr. Bolton, "he had impressed you with the liturgy?"

"Just so," said Miss Sary, "as a kind of singing-robe for Arthur—that was the young man's name."

"And devoid of Arthur?" asked the bishop.

"I haven't had a chance of studying it—thanks to our devotion to Kilridge—at least, not until this morning."

"Then perhaps you'll allow me to present you with a prayer-book," suggested Mr. Bolton.

Miss Sary grinned.

"Ah, but that's only like seeing it on a peg," she said. "It wants filling with a man."

"And does this man fill it?" asked the bishop.

"We-ell," said Miss Sary, "he knows it's a singing-robe."

"Well, come," said her brother, "that's something, anyway."

"It would be," agreed Miss Sary, "if he could only see his way not to——"

They waited in silence.

"She's not trying to be kind," said Dr. Lennox, "she's only hunting for the right word."

"Strut," said his sister presently.

CHAPTER VII

SIMILARLY critical, but with a sensitiveness for which she thanked her Maker, it was no less an authority than the Lady Sophia Botley who had described the young Chotes as being worse than heathen. For while the latter, as the hymnologist informed her, did at any rate bow down to wood and stone, neither Bill, Berenice nor Selina ever bowed down to anything at all—except, possibly, in the case of the latter, to an occasional administration of the slipper or the hair-brush.

That in part this was undoubtedly the fault of poor George, Lady Sophia was obliged to admit; although if the first lady Chote had not been a miserable creature, and the second both ill-tempered and immoral, poor George might so easily have been different. As it was, alas, even she herself, perhaps their only religious connection, had been compelled at last to leave the Chotes to themselves—heading visibly, and without exception, to eternal if not temporal disaster.

At the same time she had done her best. Thank God again, she could say that. And it was largely through her that Berenice, the most docile of the trio, had been confirmed, during her residence there at school, by her friend the dear bishop of Eastbourne. Selina, she feared, would never remain

at any one establishment long enough for the necessary preparation, which was, of course, quite impossible at home. And Bill, who had absconded from Eton on the verge of the same ceremony (though not on its account), had never returned thither for various reasons.

Under the circumstances, therefore, it was perhaps not altogether surprising that when Berenice, being, as she expressed it, bored stiff, announced her intention of going to church, her brother Bill should have given vent to what passed with him for sarcasm. She was reclining, at the time, upon the billiard-room lounge, her eyes still drowsy from slumber, and her skirt displaying what Lady Sophia would have described as a very immodest proportion of well-filled stocking.

"Good god," said Bill, "they'll turn you out."

"See that foller-through, Lollie?" bawled Sir George.

"It's the new parson," said Selina, chalking her cue, "he's got such bee-yewtiful hair."

Sir George chuckled.

"'Straordinary thing that," he said, "stick on fourteen, Lollie. Most 'straordinary thing I've ever heard of. Good enough for the *Winnin' Post*, I'm damned if it's not. 'Benedictus benedicat'—an' romped home, with a game leg, at fifteen to one against."

Berenice yawned, dropped her feet to the floor, and strolled over to the scoring board.

"How are you gettin' on?" she inquired of Miss Jameson.

"Oo—toppin'," said Lollie, who had subscribed

two fives and a three to Sir George's total of eighty as against the combined sixty-seven of Selina and Bill.

"There's the bell," said Selina, "you'd better get a hustle on."

Berenice surveyed her with meditative eyes.

"Don't be cheeky," she said at last, "or I'll beat you when I come back."

"Damn you, Selina," shouted Bill, who had just missed a 'sitter' over the middle pocket, "why the devil can't you keep out of the light?"

Miss Jameson followed languidly with an ineffectual poke.

"Oo—how seely," she exclaimed, giving place to Selina.

Berenice moved towards the door, taking Bill's playful cue in an easy stride.

"Fine high-steppin' filly—eh, what?" said Bill, "an' when did you last go prayin'?"

Berenice, whose sense of humour was proverbially sluggish, stopped for a moment to consider.

"Well," she said gravely, "not countin' weddin's, it must be nearly seven years ago—when I got confirmed."

"Ah, that's where you have me," said Bill; "that's why you're so bloomin' pious."

But at the door she suddenly remembered something.

"Where's your prayer-book?" she asked Selina.

"Haven't got one," said Selina, who was compiling her biggest break with considerable gastric discomfort.

"But I thought you had to—at your last school."

"I wish you wouldn't talk to me," said Selina, "I swopped the beastly thing, years ago."

Berenice paused again for a moment in thought.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter much," she said—which was how it came about that some ten minutes later Dick Bolton met her, taking the road to Kilridge with that long-limbed, boyish stride of hers, and her hair and cheeks two neighbouring shades of copper.

For while she was excessively crude, of course, and even apart from that not, he thought, to be considered beautiful, health, at any rate, he could not deny her from her chestnut hair to the tips of her brogues. Moreover, as her eyes assured him, his private opinion on either point would have left her completely undisturbed—an expression that at once piqued and attracted him, although he believed it to be quite impersonal. She simply accepted him, that was to say, in an entirely friendly—almost brotherly—*camaraderie*, as an articulate portion of the landscape that happened, as a rule, to look nice.

And yet, when one came to consider them, they were exceedingly pleasant eyes, too, well-opened, clear, and grey, and with a leisurely steadiness of gaze that sometimes caused, but seldom intended, embarrassment—the product, according to her family, of an inherent slowness of cerebration, but the window also of something known best, perhaps, to the waves beyond Wingbarrow Nob.

So he pulled up his horse, and looked down into them—himself, as he was contented to know, not altogether an unattractive figure; and the two

of them grouped, *en plein air*, a picture that you are invited to contemplate, though not without sundry reservations.

For while it was true that, in his leisure moments, Dick Bolton might find Windy amusing, he did so at a certain risk, and in the face of his father's disapproval. It was only, indeed, since he had established himself at Stack that he had ventured upon anything like intimacy. And while undoubtedly the present atmosphere of Creel was generally a trifle oppressive to him, he was at any rate thus far in agreement with it—that both now as heir-apparent, and in future as a county member, he must ride, as regarded the Chotes, on a distinctly wary rein; with which admissions, however, it was by no means disagreeable to be looking down into Berenice's eyes.

"Hullo," he said, "where are you off to?"

She told him to guess.

"Not to church?" he said incredulously.

She nodded, patting the horse's neck.

"Getting married?" he asked.

"No," she said, "only bored—stiff."

He ran his eye over her vigorous person.

"You don't look very stiff," he remarked.

She accepted this without further comment.

"You'll hear Selina's friend—with the voice."

"Yes," she said.

"That's why you're going, I suppose?"

Berenice frowned a little.

"Well, I don't know. I hadn't thought about it. Perhaps it is."

"You'll see the governor and the bishop down

there,"—he nodded towards the valley. "I've just been getting some morphia for old Toby."

"Is he bad?" she asked.

"Going to die."

"Poor old Toby—he could spout too, what?"

She sometimes dropped into Bill.

"Yes, poor old chap. But he won't spout much longer now."

And if Dick could have forgotten that in a radical village old Toby was the most popular character, his errand to Dr. Lennox might have been called an errand of mercy.

"You're comin' in to supper, I suppose, aren't you?" she said. He nodded. It was one of the habits that he had drifted into since settling at Stack.

"Perhaps I'll toddle down presently to meet you," he said, and laid his whip to his horse's flank.

A minute later, however, he turned in his saddle, and bestowed a more critical glance upon her.

"Quaint girl," he murmured to himself, and wondered idly why she was going to church. For being bored, when one came to think of it, was at the best only half a reason. And yet it was certainly unlikely that the parson had anything to do with it. For she must have seen, he thought, that the fellow was an ass, even if she hadn't spotted him for a bounder—where indeed, perhaps, it would be easier to leave it. For while, as Dick Bolton observed, to be bored may demand an adventure; yet surely that adventure's sphere is selected upon less general grounds—to the

scientific some stronghold of nature, to the metaphysical some problem of mind, and to the religious some aspect of God. But Berenice, as has surely become evident, was neither scientific nor metaphysical, while Lady Sophia Botley has been quoted with respect to her religion. Whereas, as regarded Mr. Thompson, there was at any rate the sensation of novelty.

Whether that was sufficient; whether, in spite of her admission to Dick, it had indeed joined hands with her boredom; and if so, to what latent faculty it had contrived to make its appeal—it would have been no easy matter to determine. Let it therefore be sufficient to say that, her conversation with Dick having delayed her, she arrived at the church door rather warm; and that she became conscious, as she hesitated in the aisle, of an unfamiliar sensation of shyness. It was disturbing, but not enough so to alarm her; and it deepened presently into something less easily definable—something born, perhaps, of the gathering worshippers; the strain of the harmonium voluntary; and the wild, meek flowers upon the altar.

CHAPTER VIII

I

FOR the first time, then, and scarcely too soon, perhaps, in this troubled portion of this history, Mr. Thompson fills the stage to a more public and discriminating audience. The bishop, the doctor, Miss Sary, and Mr. Bolton, they were all present, together with Colonel Trent and those several others, unnamed in our pages, but possibly none the less significant. Very decorously, too, as became the occasion, they awaited his appearance. And when presently, from the little door near the altar rail, he emerged in his robes, that tiny escape of strut, which she had detected in the morning, was no longer apparent even to Miss Sary.

For here at last, and with a sense of really enormous relief, Mr. Thompson knew himself to be standing upon certain ground, four-square to all men, and a master in his own house; wherein, having taken the measure of his hearers, he might wear his singing-robe with effortless assurance.

The little building, too, set half-way on its hill, had by now become comparatively familiar to him, fitting him, as he moved down towards his desk, like a garment still new enough to be stimulating, but already the easy minister to his grace. And though it was quite small, of course, and the service

performed in it singularly barren, yet its texture, so long sanctioned by wind and time, seemed already to have clothed him with a deeper dignity than St. Ninian's.

For that was a flower, vigorous no doubt, but exotic—grafted upon, and possibly in time to become incorporated with, the old stem grown up through history; but this was the stem itself, old in wisdom and mature, that still held the sound heart of the people—that had budded into Canterbury and York. From the grey tiles upon the roof to the still perfect Norman arch above the chancel steps, it endued him with the sense of being once more in the true upswelling of the sap, in real succession to the past, and upon his chosen way towards the future. It was as though, even, gathering him up from the ornate obscurity of St. Ninian's and the ribaldi laughter of the Cossingtons and Chotes, it had reiterated and affirmed Mummy's brave words in the Sulgrave Road.

That he had already succeeded, too, in exhibiting a little his proper personality became evident to him almost at once—not only in this enlarged congregation, but in its new spirit of reverent expectation. For whereas, when he had first knelt this morning, only three or four persons had seen fit to unite with him, he was now conscious, as he rose from his knees, that at least a score had bent their heads with his.

He leaned back in his chair, and allowed himself a slow scrutiny of the people in the pews; and while the number of villagers had almost more than doubled itself, he could see that to the scanty

visitors also had accrued, perhaps, another two dozen. There were present, too, several more men, and in particular three, whom he found just a trifle puzzling, each of them intellectual in a certain way, one of them (the shabbiest) apparently in orders, and all of them under the wing of an uncompromising lady in black, whom he had observed at the earlier service, and not suspected of approval. Well, well—it merely emphasised the deception of appearances; and he could not help regretting a little that of all those who had witnessed his discomfiture only the colonel should be present to appreciate his reinstatement. And it was then, far back, that he suddenly caught sight of Berenice, confined (there seemed no other word to describe it) in a pew near the door, a little awkward, it seemed, and even shy, and certainly very obviously stared at. She had forgotten to kneel down, too, and her eyes, when he first saw her, were engrossed upon his surplice; while some instinct—a memory, perhaps, of Windy—made him hesitate for a moment to encounter them with his own; though he would do so, and he trusted to some purpose, before she was very much older.

But she was there. And as he rose to his feet the thought flashed into his mind how appositely, from different standpoints, they had met again this evening. For Return was to be the keynote, as he had planned it, of this particular service—the return of the prodigal to his father, of the People to their Church. And indeed it might almost seem that circumstances, after all, had hardly let him down quite so badly as he had supposed; that

he had preached, perhaps, in that far country much better than he knew; and that here even—who could tell?—were the timid first-fruits of his martyrdom.

Then the grocer's wife, who acted as organist, came to the final chord, struck a false note, recovered it carefully, and brought her prelude to a finish—and so, after a sufficient pause, Mr. Thompson rose up in his place.

II

Now, to deny that one has a gift merely amounts, of course, to affectation; and to be aware of its effect is no more than a corollary of intelligence. But never again, perhaps, would Mr. Thompson perceive, with quite so gracious a subtlety, such an immediate reflection of his natural appeal.

From the first syllable, indeed, of those matchless words that he had selected, it came thrilling back to him—the full homage of their attention; and not merely round-eyed, out of the unconcealed gaping of the field and sea-shore workers, but reticently as manifest in the quick, almost voluptuous drooping of the shabby clergyman's eyelids, and the very slight upward movement of the two heads on either side of him.

“I will arise, and go to my father”—as little, perhaps, as any words ever penned need they owe to their utterer; and it must be set down to the immortal honour of the translators that not even a Cossington could wholly have frustrated them. And now, like the delicate, deliberate parting of a veil, they seemed to invite, as it were, even the most

careless to behold the vision that they disclosed—the famished son; the old man's arms; and far off behind them both, that lambent Spirit out of which they had sprung.

“And will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. . . .”

It would have been hard to guess then that there was to come a time, not so very far hence, when he would shudder at every detail of this service; when the consciousness of the end to which he thought that he had subdued it would become to him an almost inerasable blasphemy. And yet, perhaps, even so, he might have taken this for his comfort—that it was too great, surely, to have been entirely suborned; and that, for all his so skilful moulding, it must still have cast above the shape that he intended at least a gossamer of holiness. Thus, gently turning round for the exhortation, he allowed his eyes to exact from Berenice's the first, half-conscious tribute of their worship.

And here, before venturing to differ a little from quite so precise a definition of her attitude, it should be noted that Mr. Thompson's opinion was by no means to be lightly set aside. For there would seem to be certain of the profounder impulses of womanhood that reveal themselves more candidly, perhaps, to even the obtusest of priests than to any of his brothers, soldiers, poets, or athletes as they may be. And indeed on this particular subject, although Selina, as has been seen, was sufficiently fresh to have disconcerted him, Mr. Thompson was in reality an in-

g

dustrious observer; while with Vavasseur, a fellow-curate and a somewhat ardent feminist, he had held several notable discussions, venturing even, once or twice, with considerable success, upon the perilous ground of exact classification.

Thus the Woman Ardent—of Berenice's age—had seemed to divide herself chiefly into four classes; first, the enthusiastic, college-bred, fight-the-good-fight type, capable of infinite, but easily diverted hero-worship, slangily concealed; next, the soulful (and usually shallow), a prober into Father Lucy's remoter symbolism, susceptible of the most violent and often grotesque devotion, and thistledown on the least waft of Pity; third, the confidential, relying, with apparent but dubious candour, on a taken-for-granted celibacy—a type to be watched with a very kindly but unsleeping observation; and lastly, the ordinary cassock-hunter, omnipresent but obvious; and again, behind all these, reaching out into infinite, shadowy backgrounds, all other marriageable young ladies, not always in one class, often indeed in a transition period between one and another, but all, with a few solitary exceptions, responding, in the long run, to their appropriate ecclesiastical stimulus. From all of which it will appear that, from one standpoint, at any rate, Mr. Thompson was no little of an expert.

And so, though it was not—not quite worship, perhaps, that now seemed to be shining to him so gratefully across these pews, it may quite probably have contained one or two of its elements; curiosity for the moment swelling certainly foremost, but

with penitence and even awe, reluctant little sisters, already to be seen upon its either side.

For Berenice's eyes were far too clumsy to conceal them, or the frank confession of discomfort in which they now stood framed—as though, hatless and barefooted, she had blundered, as was her wont, into some Presence unexpectedly august; before whom, with a new and mysterious authority, moved the rather tall, rather pale young man whom yesterday she and her family had laughed at.

III

“And hath given power and commandment to his ministers to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins.”

Presently, when she was less concerned about the speaker himself, the great words, no doubt, would come frowning back to her, these uneasy mysteries of which Mr. Thompson was a steward. But for the moment, at any rate, they marched irrelevant above her head, while her mind, after its own uncompromising fashion, began slowly to apply itself to Mr. Thompson's readjustment.

For while Berenice, as Mr. Thompson had already discovered, was remarkably unconcerned with many aspects of the moralities, she was, at the same time, entirely honest to a certain private standard of sportsmanship that had somehow contrived to evolve itself within her. And now, as she reflected upon it, it seemed growingly clear to her that her easy nod, her unquestioned superiority, and the rather conscious kindness

with which yesterday she had treated him, had been not only cheek, but even (if the word had occurred to her) bordering upon sacrilege. Well, it was just like her, and she couldn't help recalling (only that, of course, had been more serious) how once, on the way to a race-meeting, she had laid down the laws of horsemanship to a reticent little man who had been travelling with them. Afterwards, baked with shame, she had discovered him to have been the king's jockey; and it had seemed the only sporting thing to do, to seek him out at the paddock with an abject apology. But, even so, she had never actually scoffed at the little man; and she had afterwards been able to make amends to him. Whereas to Mr. Thompson—well, one couldn't exactly go and apologise to this particular kind of man for laughing at him; and especially when the laughter had been mostly inward.

They were on their knees now, and she surveyed him once more, very solemnly, over her brown knuckles. Yes, there was no doubt of it, it had been *damned* cheek—and here he was again serenely unconscious of her.

“O Lord, open thou our lips.”

“O God, make speed to save us”—and then, clear above the commotion of uprising, “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost”; so that long before the Psalms came to an end there she was, standing openly, shoes in hand, as it were—and at a very properly repentant distance.

IV

It will be seen, therefore, that Mr. Thompson's error had been rather one of prematurity than misinterpretation, and that he had succeeded, after all, with almost unexpected ease, in establishing his privilege to holy ground—with the result that Berenice, who changed her deliberate conceptions of people very slowly, saw him not only then, but thereafter for many months, clad in a splendour that she did not understand, but that somehow, deep down, she knew to be sacred.

For now, having focused him, as it were, once for all in her economy, having begged his pardon and bowed her head, her more individual concern with him began gradually to widen itself to his mission; so that around and beyond Mr. Thompson she became increasingly more conscious of some brooding Background—of some Order, vaster and more secret, for which he breathed and stood. It was not to his loss; and indeed, as the spell upon her deepened, he would merely gain from it in majesty and in the distance that was growing between them. But there it was, and she knew now, with a kind of curious recognition, that it had been impinging upon her ever since she entered the building—something vague and challenging, and in which, most certainly, she desired to have no part.

"Thou that hearest the prayer—unto Thee shall all flesh come."

The words annoyed her, even, spoken lustily at her side by Pillman, the doctor's groom. For

the Psalms were read at Kilridge by the priest and the people in alternate verses—an arrangement that owed its origin to Colonel Lincoln Trent, who distrusted harmony, and now crossed the aisle to Berenice, with a significant prayer-book in his hand.

"Thou shalt show us wonderful things in Thy might, O God of our salvation"—and it said much for the magnetism of Mr. Thompson's gifts that Berenice's blushes remained so largely unnoticed.

"Thou that art the hope of all the ends of the earth, and of them that remain in the broad sea"—and not all the colonels in Christendom could have stemmed the tide of its music; that even to Berenice seemed to rise a little, and fall—like the deep brink of some unseen ocean.

And then here was Mr. Thompson, facing directly down the church, and reading, with a really extraordinary sense of conviction, a fierce tale about the Philistines and the ark of God; wherein God Himself, with an almost newspaper actuality, played His part as intimately—so it seemed to Berenice—as it might have been played by Lord Kitchener or the Kaiser. It was extraordinary. But it was more. For read now, as Mr. Thompson was reading it—with the assent, as it were, of his own personality—it seemed to emerge towards her with a curious, almost menacing fascination; as though Something, risen suddenly from the dead, had touched fingers with those great echoes still tingling from the walls—Absolution, Remission, and the World without End.

Then presently the people began to sing again;

and she found herself regarding them more closely, most of them familiar, of course, but seen now from a novel and rather arresting angle. The doctor, Miss Sary, Pillman, the blacksmith's son—they were all there, some of them singing with an obviously wholehearted conviction, others more nonchalant, perhaps, but all of them apparently quite familiar with these mysteries, this ark-contained God, and these resounding definitions.

As they sang, too, fresh statements began to chant themselves into prominence.

"He hath shewéd strength—shewéd strength with his arm"—and it was almost as though they believed that they were singing about Somebody real.

"And the rich he hath, he háth sent émp-ty away."

Well, she was not rich, of course. But then, on the other hand, most of the people who were singing these things were of the kind that would probably think her so. And what about Windy and her father?

It was funny, but not until now had her thoughts turned back at all to the world that she had so recently left. But now, with each onward movement of the service, with every sentence that fell from Mr. Thompson's lips, it seemed perceptibly to be thrust away from her; and yet not out of sight but into a remote, almost bird's-eye distinctness—a tiny world imprisoned in a bubble.

"Swear not at all," quoted Mr. Thompson, "neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool"—with her father oscillating redly between his whisky and the

billiard-table; with Bill, peaceable and robust, and smelling of the stable; with Selina and Miss Jameson and Mademoiselle—and around them all, their unquestioned little orbit, hers too, of accepted and sufficing experiences.

“That ye might be children,” said Mr. Thompson, “of your Father which is in heaven.”

Yes, it was really rather funny that they should all be revolving out there, so placidly unconscious of these gathering cloud-banks—Absolution, Remission, and the Life Everlasting. And yet again funny was a word that somehow died on one’s lip with one’s eyes forced now, almost for the first time, towards this pale Christ upon the cross, Who was crucified, dead, and buried; and Whom now, with a bland and hearty gusto, these people were proclaiming as the Lover of their souls.

But it was a beautiful hymn, and one, apparently, that recognised a little, and to a certain extent cancelled, these darker interrogations that had been mantling her horizon. She was aware, too, of a quite noticeable access of warmth in the voices of those about her; as though they also had been waiting, but with the calmness of foreknowledge, for this moment to arrive, and were now, in the simpler language of the hymn, proclaiming their satisfaction at its coming.

She looked down at the book, following the words with a close attention.

“Jesu, lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.”

And it was as though—still half in spite of herself—she, too, were being drawn into some inner court, where she might behold, if she would, the more intimate significance of all this worship. It was not without resentment that she felt this to be happening. She would rather, indeed, far rather, be anywhere else in the world—ploughing her cheerful way, for instance, through those nearer waters. But at least, in other people, they were an understandable cause of fear, and a bosom had, at any rate, a human sound.

Moreover, even as they sang, the whole congregation, and herself with it, seemed to have passed under some new and tenderer Presidency, that presently she realised to be depicted in that patient Figure above the altar before which you may see her now, protesting but overcome, gazing, through the whiteness of Mr. Thompson, at the uplifted Son of God behind him.

V

Presently—a long time hence—she would wake up again, she supposed, into the real world now far out of sight. And ah, when she did so, how well she would guard herself against any recurrence of this nightmare. And yet, even as she resolved upon this, there crept into her mind the doubt, suppose—suppose that this were not a nightmare after all; and that even when she awoke, when she returned, she should find it with her still, always there, and always liable, even at Windy, to be plucking at her sleeve?

And yet again she had always known, of course

—a long way off—that these various things had happened, brushing now and then against her life, ever so lightly, in the shapes of Christmas, Easter, and Good Friday. But they had never intruded themselves upon her like this, Absolution, Remission, their necessity, and this awful, twisted—Person on the Cross. No, it was unfriendly; and even Mr. Thompson should not persuade her otherwise.

“Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord, and by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night. . . .”

Because she, Berenice Chote, had never been walking in the darkness, or at any rate had never feared its dangers; and so, if this Man had crucified Himself for her, well, it was horrible, pathetic, infinitely good of Him, only . . .

And then they were all singing again—“Rock of Ages, cleft for me”—and here He was looking down upon them once more, upon her too, with His helpless, yielded muscles, and eyes sad enough to break one’s heart.

VI

Perceive then in this outwardly unmoved young lady how almost more than successfully the ground had been prepared for Mr. Thompson’s personal sowing; and see him now in the pulpit, with upraised hand, invoking the Sacred Names. For he had forgotten, for the moment, to the confusion of his listeners and the indignation of the colonel, that his remarks should rather have been prefaced on his knees; and it needed all his win-

someness to cover so unfortunate a slip. But this was forthcoming; and in a minute or two, with a real and practised talent, he had created just the atmosphere that he intended; or rather, with a skill, unobserved by most, but not lost upon the bishop, had gathered up the converging themes of the service towards the telling—the immensely telling, climax of the sermon.

For now deftly, but with a deftness admirably concealed, he drew for them his picture—the careless prodigal, the world's 'good fellow,' taking his right to feast so easily for granted, and the road to pleasure with so brave a smile. They could almost *see* him—could they not?—with that light kiss on his finger-tips; and in his heart so very little more, perhaps, than the quick forgetfulness of youth. They could follow him then in that new land of his desire. They could see him so royally at home there, with the laurels fastened round his brow. They could see those eyes that judged him even as they fawned. Slowly then they might see the stars grow pale above the banquet; and the revellers at dawn go bandying his name. They could feel—even to tears—the subtle changing of the wind; and among the roses and the dancing the first chill sentinel of frost—the quick looks, the shrugged shoulders, and then at last, by twos and threes, the hurried, polite departure of the guests.

Alas now poor prodigal—for the wreaths had vanished with a vengeance, and after the wreaths the robes, and with the robes the hopes against hope; until behold here, in the place of them, rose

the Facts, stark and inevitable—and he was fain to fill his belly with the husks that the swine did eat. . . .

He paused there, refraining, as in earlier days he would not have done, from making any personal comparisons. But ah, poor prodigal!—for who but Berenice had been the gay youth on the flowery road, caught now, and pinned, like the butterfly that she was, by those reproachful, searching eyes above the pulpit?

But was that the only tragedy? Why no; for let them look now upon the other side, at the old home so desolate of its boy, at the father's grief-stricken eyes, at his eager runnings to the gate, and his slow—ah, so slow—returns. For here there were no songs to speed the hours along, even for a season; but instead, from dawn to dusk, and dusk to dawn, only the grey creeping of the moments, and the year-long, empty hours of the night. No, there were two tragedies; and that must always be the way of it—the pitiful, twin tragedy of the great heart lightly spurned, and the little one grown hungry in the wilderness; until at last, at long last, the little one—comes to itself.

And how strange a phrase was that—as though from some evil dream, some self-sought anæsthesia, it awakens, for the first time, perhaps, to its real life; and beholds itself after all—ah, the wonder of it!—built for none other than the Father, Whose service, if it may but return, now shines as perfect freedom. No wonder then that the little story, told with such flawless brevity, had blazed

its way into the very heart of humanity. For it had selected, and in divine words clothed for ever, the inmost, changeless need of every heart. And from then onwards there was no tragedy any longer, unless it might be the irrevocable tragedy of delay. For there, to the limping wanderer's eyes had risen Pardon's very self, with arms outstretched, even as upon the Cross of expiation; so wide that never the deepest-fallen son had dropped too far for his immortal welcome . . . and so to God the Father and God the Son; while Mr. Thompson, glancing at his watch, perceived that he had not exceeded twenty minutes.

VII

"Well," said Miss Sary to her brother, "are you sorry you came?"

He stroked his chin rather thoughtfully.

"N-no," he said. "I was distinctly interested."

A group of villagers, obviously impressed, passed by them with Mr. Thompson's name upon their lips.

"Well, he's won the *vox populi*, anyway," she remarked.

"Eh?" said her brother. "Ah! Yes. I suppose he has."

The bishop and Mr. Bolton, who had been examining the decoration on the font, joined them, and they lingered a little, sauntering up the old flagged path.

"I think," said Miss Sary suddenly, "that I shall ask him in to supper."

"To prove him with hard questions?" smiled the bishop.

She looked at him quickly.

"Do you think that's necessary?"

"Have you damned him already then?" said the bishop.

Miss Sary shook her head.

"I never damn people," she said. "I merely observe them."

"And Mr. Thompson has been docketed, I suppose?"

"Not quite; or I shouldn't be asking him to supper."

"But sufficiently to make probing unnecessary?"

"Just so," she said, "unless I'm very far wrong."

"You mean that he'll reveal himself?"

"And nothing else, I'm afraid," said Miss Sary.

The bishop was silent, and she glanced at him sideways.

"You're considering me cruel," she observed calmly.

"Not exactly."

"Callous then?"

"No; or you wouldn't be troubling your——" his eyes twinkled a little, "your brain about him."

"But you disapprove of my attitude? It's entirely dispassionate."

"Well, of course," smiled the bishop, "if it's really that—but I should like to register my debt to him for an hour and a quarter's—luxury."

Miss Sary coughed.

"I should have thought," she said, "with your

views, that mere luxury wouldn't have satisfied you."

"It didn't," said the bishop. "Who was the girl across the aisle?"

"The one who was given a prayer-book, and bolted at the first chance?"

The bishop nodded.

"Berenice Chote."

"Not——?"

"Yes," said Miss Sary. "Eldest daughter. I met her yesterday morning on the downs. She had just swum round Wingbarrow Nob. It had been her life's dream, she told me—probably its only one. But at least she's *pukka*."

"Meaning that Mr. Thompson?"

She fixed him with her bright eyes, as keen as his own.

"Well," she said, "wasn't it just *that* that you missed?"

The bishop thought for a moment.

"Well, perhaps it was," he admitted, "but then I may have been asking too much."

"Why too much?"

"He's only a boy, you see, isn't he?"

Miss Sary pursed her lip.

"At thirty?" she inquired grimly.

"But you can't measure by years, you know."

"Then you think that he has a gift?"

"So much more than that," said the bishop, "that if——"

"If there were a real man behind it?"

"Say a grown man."

"Well—a grown man then?"

"I should thank God for him on my knees."

"M'm," said Miss Sary, "now you're getting beyond me."

VIII

But alas, every triumph must be paid for, and not always by the victor alone. And when at last Berenice was able to slip from the church, it was into a world, as she had half foreseen, that would never be quite the same to her any more.

Not unkindly, perhaps, but with an unmistakable and sustained unanimity, this was made clear to her even from the outset; as though, almost, from the little cluster of circumspect houses to the old downs that she had loved so easily, some message, swifter than the wind, had run abroad to await her coming. She looked about her, up the white road, and at the moon that hung above its bend; at the disappearing hills, and the blue, motionless sea. And 'Something's happened to you,' they all seemed to say. 'You're different. You're *branded*.'

'Yes, yes; but how should *you* know?'

'Why because yesterday you were one of us—even as once, when you were still a child, you played in the servants' hall. But now you are looking upon us with altered eyes; now we are no longer our own; you have found us out; for we are His, and He made us. . . . No, you couldn't help it, of course. And no doubt it was bound to happen. But don't you see? We must wait a little—for our own sakes—to watch how you are going to shape.'

Even so, perhaps, must Eve have felt, when first she saw her garden with enlightened eyes. And the knowledge, that she could never more put away from her, may well have seemed too costly at the price—poor Eve, who was paying it still, maybe, as Berenice climbed the road to Windy. . . .

It was upon the gravel outside the gate that she again met Dick.

"Why, good lord!" he said, "whatever's been happening to you?"

Berenice stared at him with her new eyes.

"Oh, nothin'," she said slowly.

He laughed.

"Well, you look—you look as if you had just been converted or something."

She began to smile a little, examining him with an unusual intensity. For perhaps, after all, she had only been dreaming; and he was being decent enough to wake her up. He took a little paper from her hand.

"What's this?" he said, looking down at it with a frown.

"Something the colonel gave me," she explained, "when he lent me his prayer-book."

It was that gentleman's *Tract for Sportsmen*, '*Is God your Pal?*'

Dick tore it into several little pieces.

"What insolence—what damned insolence!" he said.

Then, stooping suddenly, he kissed her lips.

CHAPTER IX

It was at the vestry door that Mr. Thompson encountered Miss Sary.

"How d'you do?" she said briskly. "I'm Miss Sarah Lennox. My brother is the doctor here. We should be so glad if you would come and have supper with us."

He looked down at her with a little hesitation. For while he would have preferred to take his meal with the colonel, who was evidently a person of some consequence in the village, it seemed unlikely now that he would be afforded the opportunity. But the doctor, on the other hand—well, one could never be quite sure about doctors; and an initial error of intimacy might prove somewhat difficult to expunge.

"Cold beef," said Miss Sary, "and celery; stewed gooseberries and banana trifle;" and there was something in her extraordinary plainness that seemed to lend pathos to the invitation.

It was to this, at any rate, that Mr. Thompson yielded, extending to her a chivalrous hand.

"Thank you," he said kindly, "I think I should like to very much."

"Well," said Miss Sary, "just make quite sure, and then I'll show you the way."

He stared at her with a quick change of

expression, but with the point of a philosophical walking-stick she was now busy uprooting a plantain; and when she looked up once more he was hardly so sure of her impertinence. It might only have been a mask, perhaps, to conceal her deeper feelings.

"And beer," she added, "there'll be beer."

He resumed his smile with an effort.

"Then, thank you," he repeated, "I shall be glad to accept."

"Good," said Miss Sary heartily, as they turned towards the old lych-gate. "My brother and Mr. Bolton have gone before. But this gentleman here is the bishop of the diocese"—just as easily as that do these tremendous things happen.

They shook hands; and the middle-aged eyes had to look up a little to meet the younger ones. And it was because of this, perhaps, that the younger ones felt suddenly as if something had been conferred upon them.

'If this is a bishop,' they thought, 'why shouldn't we become a bishop's too?'—and far back behind that middle-aged twinkle they seemed to detect their answer—grateful and unexpectedly humble—'Why not, indeed?'

"I'm so sorry," said Mr. Thompson. "If I'd known I'd have——"

"Ah, but then you didn't," smiled the bishop, "and I'm very glad to meet you."

Mr. Thompson's mind darted back, embracing each detail of the service. But yes, he could quite equably confront even a bishop of the diocese.

They walked slowly down the flower-scented lane.

"You've come from London," said the bishop.

Mr. Thompson considered for a moment.

"Yes," he said quite frankly, "from St. Ninian's—St. Ninian's, Poplar."

It was perhaps rather a bold confession, but, on the whole, it seemed a wise diplomacy. For an apparent hesitation to avow this might quite easily have prejudiced his hearer, whose theological position was unknown to him. While, on the other hand, pronounced without undue enthusiasm, the declaration need not proclaim him as too ardent a Lucy-ite.

But the bishop was almost amusingly irrelevant.

"Why then," he said eagerly, "you must know Basil Matthews."

Mr. Thompson could scarcely help smiling—not only because this was such a long way the last name that usually followed upon a mention of St. Ninian's, but because it was even more seldom pronounced with so entirely disproportionate a reverence.

But of course he did know old Matthews—from *within*, so to speak; and he was certainly not going to disparage him in the presence of a presumable believer. Moreover, the bishop was examining him with a peculiarly attentive expression.

"Is he well?" he asked quickly.

"Oh, I think so," said Mr. Thompson, and then, very delicately, began to turn the subject. For really it would be difficult to explain how little Father Matthews mattered.

"Of course," he said, "we're often a bit over-worked."

But the bishop had become silent, and Mr. Thompson felt a little uneasy.

"Do you know him very well?" he inquired softly.

The bishop looked up with a jerk.

"Eh?" he said. Then he smiled. "Do you?"

"Well, I've lived with him for nearly five years."

"Why, then you ought to, of course," said the bishop.

They acknowledged some salutes from a cottage.

"But I imagine," said Mr. Thompson, "that—er—lately, perhaps——"

"He hasn't been booming?" suggested the bishop.

"Well," said Mr. Thompson, "hardly that, of course."

"No," agreed the bishop sadly, "that was always poor Matthews' failing."

But Miss Sary, who had been listening with some attention, now cocked an inquiring eyebrow.

"Aren't you getting at us a little bit?" she inquired; and Mr. Thompson, with a sudden stab of misgiving, began to wonder if he had been taking a false step. It was not likely, he thought, but even now, after his victory, his composure had not quite forgotten yesterday. Moreover, there was something, even in these kindlier people, a little remote and decidedly perplexing. What precisely this element might be he was unable as yet to define; but that it existed he became increasingly aware—some mysterious *va sans dire*.

shared between them, but unknown to himself; some standard, even, of speech and conduct, by which he felt himself continually being judged.

One thing at least, however, was clear—that whatever it was it could scarcely be hostile; or why should they have invited him to supper, and so frankly appreciated his triumph?

"Though I fancy," said Miss Sary, as she helped him to gooseberries, "that the story you selected is a little bit later than Q."

Mr. Thompson stared at her.

"Thank you," he said, "but I suppose you mean earlier."

Miss Sary paused for a moment with her spoon in the gooseberry dish; and he saw to his own surprise that he had caught the general attention.

"Is it in Q?" she inquired.

Mr. Thompson smiled a little, shaking his head.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that I haven't read all his books."

And at that there was a sudden ripple of real, but quite courteous laughter.

"Done, my dear theologian," scoffed Dr. Lennox, as he received his portion, "done in the eye very neatly—and serve you right for a pre-tentious smatterer."

Mr. Thompson was frankly at a loss.

"She means," explained the doctor gravely, "the pre-Markan source of the synoptic gospels."

"And Schmiedel, I suppose," pursued Miss Sary, "would discredit it altogether."

"But Mr. Thompson, I suspect," put in the

bishop, "has been rather too busy for much German theology."

"And probably quite rightly so," added Mr. Bolton.

Mr. Thompson collected his forces again.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I'm afraid that's rather the case. We haven't very much time at St. Ninian's for—er—the study of academic criticism."

There was a moment's silence.

"And after all," he added deliberately, "we have enough, I think, to go on with."

They were all watching him now, and he knew it, the four faces in the table candlelight—each with such a clear-cut difference, and yet all one in that mysterious quality whose discovery was still baffling him.

"Meaning?" asked Miss Sary abruptly.

He bent his head towards her with a half-serious smile.

"Authority," he said.

The doctor and Mr. Bolton had not taken their eyes from him. But the bishop had bent his head, and was crumbling his bread with his fingers.

"But whose?" said Miss Sary, persisting rather obstinately in the face of what she knew to be the sense of the meeting.

"Why, the Church's, of course," replied Mr. Thompson, assured of support, and with a slight inflection of surprise.

"Ye-es," said Miss Sary slowly, "but what exactly do you mean by that?"

Mr. Thompson glanced round at his audience.

But now, apart from Miss Sary, the others did not appear to be watching him; and he turned to her therefore with the appropriate reply.

"Christ's spiritual successors," he said smoothly.

And it was then that the outside world obtruded itself with a note to the doctor. He read it to himself in silence, and for a moment nothing else became important.

"It's old Toby," he said quietly. "He died suddenly this evening, between five and six o'clock"—and from this, after a little while, the talk drifted into local politics, the prospects of Mr. Bolton's son, and the architecture of his manor-house of Stack.

Then the bishop and Mr. Bolton rose to go, and a few minutes later Mr. Thompson did the same, Dr. Lennox accompanying him to the gate.

"There's a short cut to the vicarage over that field," he said, "and you'll find the gate just this side of the pub."

Mr. Thompson bowed, and thanked him, and Dr. Lennox waved him a genial farewell; and yet, in a narrative that desires to be truthful, one further incident must regretfully be recorded—that the doctor then raised his right foot with a sudden, rather significant gesture.

"Now, what did you mean by that?" demanded Miss Sary at his elbow.

"Hullo!" he said. "We'll—don't you think it would be a good prescription?"

CHAPTER X

I

It will have been seen then, in passing, that as regarded its immediate object, Dick Bolton's errand had been ridden in vain; and in fact, as he was told at the cottage gate, old Toby had been dead for very nearly an hour. Quite unexpected, too, the end had been, after all, as quiet as quiet, and a merciful blessing—so said the daughter-in-law who wiped her eyes at Dick's saddle; yet sorrowing not altogether as one who had no hope, and suggesting indeed, far down, an odd tremor of enjoyment.

Just "water," that was all he had said, old Mrs. Toby bein' wore out and resting downstairs; and herself (though dear knew what with baby at the breast still, and Minnie and Paul away from school with the blight), herself the only able person there, and him dead before she could run acrost the room. And please wouldn't Master Bolton like to step inside for a minute, and have a look at the body?

Dick stared down at her, detecting her simple happiness in having been the chief or, at any rate, the second figure in the little drama that she had related; and at the same time rather embarrassed by the real tear that was trickling down her nose.

Behind her, at the end of a little path, stood the old man's dwelling, with its door open—grey Durling stone under a veil of honeysuckle, with its chimney just notching the sky-line, and its walls set moth-like against the deepening purple of the downs.

"You've been main kind, you see," said the daughter-in-law, "and 'twould be only right as you should be the first to 'ave a look at 'un."

The mare became a little restive, backing round in a half circle; and a fair-haired boy in corduroys came out from behind the hedge.

"Sam here'll hold the horse for you," said the woman, "if you'll just step inside, and 'ave a look at the body."

Dick hesitated a moment, and then swung himself to earth; where standing thus you would have said him to be about five foot ten inches, broader than his father, whom he somewhat resembled, but with blunter features and his dead mother's dark eyes.

It was the moment for a lie, and he produced it efficiently.

"I should like to," he said gently, "if you're sure poor Mrs. Toby wouldn't mind."

That Mrs. Toby would indeed welcome him with an almost ghoulisn deference he knew the country-side well enough to suppose. And yet afterwards, in a minute or two almost, he was thoroughly sorry that he had come, even though it would undoubtedly please everybody all round. For although he had seen Death before—his mother's, when he was still only a boy, and twice

suddenly in South Africa when his Yeomanry had been engaged—the first had almost faded from his memory, and the others had been only a part of the game; visible evidences of the peril that had made it the best game upon earth.

But this was different, slow marching, framed in the flicker of two tallow candles, and with the last of the daylight still pallid behind the blind. This was indecent, coming gowned in night-clothes, and with a pocket-handkerchief knotted carefully under the chin; with a half-chewed biscuit upon the wash-hand stand, and a tumbler of milk going sour.

He looked down at the old face, once so merry and truculent, marked, as perhaps its radicalism had evidenced, with a readier imagination than was generally evident among his associates—and he saw that the lines of agony and laughter had merely deepened into a kind of grim finality. The nose stuck in air, too, with a kind of horrible inquisitiveness, as of somebody intruding with an illicit inquiry.

He held his breath a little, feeling sick, while the old woman stroked the forehead, crooning over the dead with endless reminiscences; and the precautionary carbolic seemed to invade him through his clothes.

"It's a good thing," he managed to say, "that it—er—all seems so peaceful."

She blinked up at him once more with rheumy eyes, as if for a moment suspecting his inner thoughts—that it was nothing of the kind, that it was merely nauseous and stark, pushed up, as

it were, with a coarse incongruity, like a handful of offal into a gentleman's face. And on such an evening, too, mid-July, and the world still ripening—pah! he would get out of it all; and damn politics if it included this. He said something about his horse, and looked no more at the thing that had been Toby.

"We shall all of us miss him," he said.

The old woman took his hand between her own, as thin almost as the dead's, and cold from its surface.

"The poor darling," she quavered, "us'll join him soon enough—and I'm sure, sir, it's very kind of you, very kind of you indeed."

Then she lifted up one of the candles to light him down the stairs, and once he stumbled, and had to make light of her apology. The two children of the daughter-in-law watched him silently across the kitchen. He took a deep breath, at the door, of the tonic, sun-cleansed air. But the odour of the carbolic still plugged his nostrils, and he wondered if he had been stricken with disease.

"Damn it all," he said, "why the devil did I go in?"—and he would have spat into the flowers, as he went up the path, if Samuel and the daughter-in-law had not been watching him from the gate. Here too, however, he had to repeat words of consolation, giving sixpence to the small boy for having held his mare; until at last, at the bend of the road, he could cut her savagely with his whip, clear out his mouth, and set for home at a gallop.

Later on in his life there was to come a moment, scarcely more, when that little tableau should compress itself into something curiously detached, the old man on the bed, and his wife; the two watchers at the gate; and the bright eyes and delicate nostrils of the mare—seen, as it were, without form and colour, even as on the sheet of a magic-lantern. But now it still clung to him with a malodorous intimacy; and it was not until he had stripped himself to the skin, and bathed, and wallowed, and scrubbed himself with soap, that he began to push away from himself the sense of contact with something foul and menacing.

This bath-room at Stack, however, was singularly comforting, built out from his own bedroom in a little wing that his father had designed, when, two years ago, on leaving the army, he had taken over the old manor from its former tenant. Both outside and in, it was seemly, adequate, and indeed luxurious—its external structure no more, apparently, than a logical outgrowth from the ripe Georgian simplicity of the main building; its tiled interior, spotless porcelain, and brasswork, its sunk trough below the canopy shower, its full-length mirror, and cork mats, at once reticent and stimulating to the feet—all of these the latest evolved of lavatory appointments; touching fingers, perhaps, with effeminacy through some eau-de-cologne and a flesh-brush, but restored again to virility in the colossal sponge upon the rack, and a pair of four-pound dumb-bells on a chair in the corner. He leaned back in the warm

water, with a cigarette between his lips, the lines of haste and nausea relaxing slowly from his face, and the pleasant conviction renewing itself within him of a physical instrument still excellently in tune. From the past, too, as he leaned back, from the long and gracious ancestry of similar hot baths strung out through time, there came trooping to him half-conscious reinforcements—the fine sense of vague, bygone activities; at Rugby and Fenner's, with the good mud cracking from his knees; on the veldt, with the fat of him at vanishing point, and his muscles like a royalist lyric; at Ranelagh, with the sharp smell of the hoof-bitten turf and the soft purring of the leather upon the ponies; of the ploughs and lanes of last season's hunting; of wet rides round his father's farms. He rang the bell for his servant, and ordered fresh socks and underclothing, and the lounge suit to be brushed, wherein presently he should go over to Windy.

"I've been messing about with a corpse," he said, and thought that the discarded clothes had better be sent at once to the cleaners.

Then he got out into the towel held up for him, and dropping it after he had rubbed himself down, stood naked before the looking-glass, stretching his shoulders with a returned equanimity. For they were good shoulders, well packed with muscle, folding themselves, with a pleasant firmness of deltoid, round the half-contracted biceps, and conducting the eye outwards and upwards to a pair of sun-browned fore-arms. He dropped his hands to his sides again, and ran his eye down the

figure before him; the plump curve of the pectorals, and the crisp hairs upon the broad chest between them; the abdomen, taut like a boxer's; the powerful bunches of thigh muscles, swelling out and tapering down to the knees; the swarthy semilune of calf, standing inwards from behind the shin-bone; the strong, neat-fashioned ankles, and sensitive, well-kept feet. He looked up again into the bronzed face, with its level eyebrows and straight nose; with its moustache, dark, and closely trimmed; with its full lips, and military chin. He reflected, with a confirmatory smile, that he had not yet lost a single tooth; and found himself looking at last into his own cool eyes, set wide, and devoid of nonsense.

His servant returned again to the bathroom.

"Quite ready, sir, now sir," he said—and his tone served to remind his master that he could still, if necessity should demand, lead cavalry again with the best.

He went back again into the sweet-smelling bedroom, now mellow with the last of the sunshine; and he saw that Mrs. Chamberlain, his housekeeper, had put a bowl of fresh roses on the table.

"Mister Toby, sir, I hear, sir," said his servant, "very sad affair, sir, down in the village."

"Yes," said Dick, buttoning his shirt, "very sad, and I'll have a peg of whisky."

The man hesitated at the door.

"Brought up to you, sir?" he inquired sympathetically.

"No, I'll have it downstairs in the study."

And in his study the good work was continued.

Fresh evidences of his own livingness shone reassuringly down upon him from the walls; lay scattered over the desk before him in the shapes of documents and letters. He glanced down at them as he filled his pipe—from the County Agricultural Association; from the secretary of the Travellers'; from the agents of the McCormick binders; from the Banner Conservative Club. Regarding him, too, even as he did so, was himself upon this flowing tide of life—as a three-quarter in '99 at Cambridge, moustacheless, with his light blue cap; in the Yeomanry, before he took his commission; in evening dress, ghastly under the lime-light, during a regimental dinner at the Cecil; on a bob-sleigh down the Cresta run, with a girl whom he had once thought of marrying; and in pink with his dead mare Queenie, who had broken her leg, and been shot last season.

He was always glad to contemplate this last—it was so perfect a photograph of them both; as good, in its way, as this other of young Dulcie, as she had smiled upon him nearly five years ago—at a cost that it was now amusing to remember, though it had been the very devil to explain.

He drank the whisky, lit his pipe, and eased his limbs a little in the fresh clothes, looking out across the seaward downs.

"Well, by George," he said, "that's better any way."

He glanced at his watch, and saw that the hour was nearly seven. By the field-path to Windy, that was now quite dry, he would have to walk a little less than two miles; and, picking up a cap

and stick in the hall, decided upon this method of travel.

"It'll do me good," he said. "It'll give me an appetite for supper."

The sun had dropped now behind Wingbarrow Head; and while the wheat was still warm with gold, the dimples in the hayfields and pastures were already swimming with translucent shadows. His breath, too, in the cooler reaches of the air, became visible in little wisps of vapour. And though by temperament he was almost entirely unimaginative, yet there was something in this gathering twilight, so instinct with the fruitful forces of life, that seemed to greet him with a peculiar encouragement. He filled his lungs consciously that these cleansing currents might penetrate them; and vaulted the stiles till at last he reached the road; whence presently he could see the white corner of Windy, and the tower, beyond it, of Kilridge church. He slackened his speed, and exchanged greetings with two farmers in a trap, substantial men, who discussed with him seriously the tidings of old Toby's death. And he perceived, as he talked to them, that they were friendly to him, and might be counted upon as future supporters.

All this time, too, he had been picturing to himself the girl that he had promised to meet—the value of her mere vitality having increased itself suddenly in his eyes. He thought of her buffeting with wet arms round that distant island of rock. He saw her afterwards, lounging homewards, half developed and wholly unsuited

to him; but with this much, at any rate, to recommend her—the rich measure of her physical life.

II

The little pieces of the colonel's tract dropped down, and turned over in the road. Berenice made a movement with her hands. Reluctantly Dick perceived that he had blundered.

"I'm awf'ly sorry," he said, "I was feeling rather dead."

He made a fresh start.

"It was old Toby," he said. "He was dead. And they made me go up, and have a look at him. That's what—that's why I—I wanted cheering up, you see."

Berenice was still scarlet, though she had been kissed before—and indeed, remembering the fact, she felt silly to be taking this so seriously.

"Oh, that's all right," she said. "That's nothin'—that's nothin' to worry about."

They turned up the drive together, and he told her the story of his adventure; not understanding her mood, but combating it, perhaps, infinitely better than he guessed, with the world very slowly becoming real to her again—once more plastic to his competent hands.

Very carefully, from beneath drooped eyelids, he scanned her as she walked beside him.

"And you were looking so—so full of beans, you know—by contrast," he concluded.

He had regained his self-command, and the words were just rightly said—half serious, but non-committal, under a delicate veil of banter;

and he began to wonder, as he again glanced down at her, if a second kiss were perhaps becoming venturable.

"We—ell," she admitted at last, "I was feelin' a bit cheap myself—a—a miserable sinner, don't you know; and all that sort of thing."

He stopped short, and they faced one another and laughed—her cheeks rather flushed again with the intimacy of her confession; and he knew now that he was once more standing upon familiar ground.

"Why, I believe," he said slowly, "that you were rotting me all the time."

And since to this she made no reply, he stooped down, and kissed her once more.

III

A little later on, when Bill had yawned himself out of Bridge, her father asked her if she had enjoyed the sermon. He was putting away the cards, and it was the first time, as it happened, in public, that this feature of the service had been referred to. Meeting Dick's rather curious gaze, she laughed a little, and said "not much"—to which her father, damning parsons in general, replied with a somewhat long-winded anecdote.

But upstairs, in the privacy of her room, she did not feel quite at ease about this incident—as though, in some unexplained way, she had transgressed her own standard of conduct. For while, on the one hand, it was quite true that she had not enjoyed either the sermon or the service

including it, on the other, they had both represented something new to her and apparently rather big—something not to be dissipated, at any rate, by an anecdote, or cancelled by an unexpected kiss. She crossed over to her window, and threw it open, staring out across the moonlit valley, bewitched—as perhaps she herself had been bewitched—into a landscape vague and unreal. She slipped her skirt down, unbuttoning her blouse, wondering if that might be the true explanation—a spell, taken regularly by some people, but to her, as a novice, very naturally more disturbing. She remembered, too, as she proceeded with her undressing, the little bubble that Windy had appeared to her; and wondered if it must still be so considered—with herself readmitted to it and as transitory. She sat down and pulled off her stockings, recollecting, for no reason, that she did not pray; and then, seeing her frowning face in the glass, she laughed suddenly, and remembered Dick. For he, too, had become curiously more significant; and his kiss, she knew, had been a kiss with a difference—a thing apart from the few others that had been bestowed upon her during old dances and after-dinner ‘rags.’

Yet wherein exactly this difference lay she found it rather difficult to determine—in nothing else, perhaps, than the moment of its birth, so hard upon a more mysterious invasion. Then she laughed again, with her lips to the candle; and, as she stood there, a new sound entered the stillness—the pad, pad, very soft, of her father’s feet creeping stealthily down the corridor outside.

CHAPTER XI

I

It is a concession, however, demanded by sanity from every vision that it shall ultimately melt, even as a rainbow, upon the hills of everyday life; and that its importance must be held to consist less in its immediate colours than in a tangible thickening of the grass, and a flower or two for the kitchen mantelpiece—a humane and, of course, welcome event, but one that must necessarily take time. Upon the somewhat fervid atmosphere, therefore, of the last and preceding chapters dawned an entirely ordinary to-morrow, in which both Berenice and Dick found life surprisingly unruffled; and in which Mr. Thompson settled down to a more habitual relation with his cure.

Thus on Monday there was a sick man to visit, and on Tuesday a baby to baptise. On Wednesday old Toby was buried, and on Thursday the Cossingtons gave a party. And twice Mr. Thompson met Miss Sary, and once, in the village, Berenice; and on Friday he went down to the bay, and began a letter of some length to his Mummy.

Into that letter we must not pry too carefully, and its value as history—since we are all artists in our letters to Mummy—would probably be somewhat dubious. With much of it, indeed, we

have already become acquainted ; with the strange coincidence by which Sir George Aloysius Lancelot Vernet Chote, eleventh baronet of Windy, was expecting a Mr. Thompson who did not arrive, and with Mr. Thompson's first luncheon at a Titled Table ; with the undoubted success of the Prodigal Son sermon that Mummy had once heard him deliver at Hammersmith ; and with the supper-party at the doctor's, where he had met the Bishop and the famous Mr. Bolton of the E.C.U. There had been the party, too, at the Cossingtons', where Mr. Thompson's fast service at tennis had several times been notably in evidence. And there had been news from poor Mr. Pratt. The effusion on his lungs had been only serous after all ; so that no operation beyond tapping had been necessary. And he hoped to be returning to Kilridge at the end of a fortnight's time. Altogether it was a triumphant epistle, that brought proud tears to Mummy's eyes, and had to be shared with Maria's auntie. And if certain other things had been suppressed, that is no business of ours. Selection is one of the missions of Art. And surely a happy lady of fifty-four is at any rate a reasonable excuse.

Then Mr. Thompson, who was sitting under Wingbarrow Point, paused for a moment, and tapped his teeth with his pen. It had already become almost commonplace to him, this little crescent of Kilridge Bay, with its peculiar pavement of stratified rocks, now radiating July at its hottest ; with its boat or two drawn up on the opposite side, upon the shingle under the coastguards'

cottages; with the green slope, above these, of Driver Head, and the ascending chalk-road to Windy; with its familiar group or two of visitors—the Manchester merchant and his wife; the two young ladies from Mildmay, beamed upon by the colonel, and now knitting mittens against the cliff, with their feet crossed meekly, to get brown; the two schoolboys convalescing from the mumps; the artist with the long hair; and the young nondescript with his mother and his fiancée—overarched by heaven, and encircled by the sea.

But he bent down again, for his mother's sake, and recorded a little scenery, scarcely observing (it is almost incredible) this shining pool under his very eyes—a pool of miracle, of emerald secrets, and a whispered malediction on shoes and stockings. Small wonder, therefore, that now, upon silent feet, two bare legs should come to worship it—legs that had been hidden from his recent survey by a crumbling buttress of cliff, and that a little startled him with their unexpected shadow. He looked up quickly, but looked down again. The feet slipped delicately into the pool.

“How d’you do?” said their owner presently.

“Good-morning,” replied Mr. Thompson.

“I was hoping,” said Selina, “that perhaps, by now, you’d have forgiven me.”

Mr. Thompson looked up for a moment at that pensive profile, but having been made wise by suffering refused to be moved by its penitence. He bent down instead to blot carefully what he had written, slip his pen into his pocket, and fold his arms about his knees. Then agreeably, but

as a man of the world, he regarded her once more—in mid-pool with her short skirt pulled up well above her knees. He saw that her legs beneath the water had become dwarfed, but still looked dainty; that three crabs were ~~running~~ sideways from them with a disturbed but pompous gait; and that some seaweed rose from her feet in liquid tendrils of colour. He examined her steadfastly with a well-guarded eye. For the moment, indeed, save that far off an unfamiliar toque crawled slowly down the cliff from Windy, they remained, perhaps, the only moving things in sight. Even the schoolboys, half-way round the bay, were lying prone upon their stomachs. Then half unconsciously he lifted the straw hat that had been discarded beside him; and Selina, raising her head, threw her hair back on her shoulders.

“It was saved from the Flood,” she said, “but the trimming’s my own.”

Now it must be remembered that Mr. Thompson possessed no sisters, and that his intimacy with women had hitherto proceeded upon profound, but somewhat ceremonial lines. It had not included, that is to say, much handling of their headgear; so that the white matter in the brain cavity of this one became a trivial but rather fragrant discovery. It swung pleasantly on an elastic chin-piece below his right forefinger, and made little mysterious shadows as it moved to and fro. He wondered why so much trouble should have been taken with what was evidently not meant to be seen. We have all wondered

this, so we must all have seen it. And then something stroked the wonder, and told it that it was a privilege—and we have noticed this too, and Selina was very happy.

“Oh you *darling*,” she cried, emerging wet, and displaying for Mr. Thompson a microscopic crablet. “Isn’t he a little ripper? At least, I suppose he *is* a he. But how can you tell?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” said Mr. Thompson, “and would you mind——?”

She pulled out a handkerchief, once white, and removed some sea-water from his knees—it was a movement so spontaneous that it would have been hard to resent it—and then she looked down at her own, rather pink, and still shining.

“Of course, an old skirt like this doesn’t matter,” she said, “and I’ve left my shoes and stockings at home. I always do when I come down here. My feet aren’t so sensitive as most people’s.” She turned up the bottom of one of them to illustrate the remark. “Now *mademoiselle* couldn’t walk down the drive at Windy for nuts—even if she thought it would be proper. But Barker and I can do it without thinking.”

“Barker?”

“Berenice, my sister. Didn’t you know? And did you see her in church, by the way?”

She lifted a pair of grave eyes to his face.

“Yes,” said Mr. Thompson, colouring a little, “she was there in the evening.”

Selina sat down with an air of confidence, one leg along the brim of the pool, and the other rising and falling, out of sight, in the water.

"I think," she said, "that she was rather *empresée*."

Mr. Thompson, with the hat still swinging from his finger, smiled a little in spite of himself.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"We-ell," said Selina, "of course we Chotes don't talk much. But I thought at supper she was distinctly distrait. I suppose you're an *awfully* good preacher, aren't you?"

"That's hardly for me to say," said Mr. Thompson.

"I knew you'd say that," said Selina, nodding approvingly, "but I believe that you *are* all the same."

She slid down into the pool again.

"I should think the water," she said, "must be nearly seventy."

Mr. Thompson crumpled his legs, and bent forward to put a hand in it.

"It *is* nice and warm," he agreed.

Selina was backing slowly along two swirling ripples.

"Have you been in at all to-day?" she asked casually.

Mr. Thompson shook his head.

"I had a bathe yesterday," he said.

"Can you swim?"

"Oh, yes," smiled Mr. Thompson, "though not very well."

"I expect you can," admired Selina, "*awfully* well."

"I'm rather out of practice, you see," said Mr. Thompson.

"We nearly always bathe from Basin Pool," said Selina.

"Where's that exactly?"

She pointed towards the promontory of Driver Head.

"The other side of it," she said, "about a mile along. But there's a nice little place before you get there. We call it the 'Gull's Nest,' just round out of sight. There's some sand there—if your feet are at all sensitive."

"I'm afraid they are," admitted Mr. Thompson.

"Then that's where you should go—round along the coastguards' path till you come to a sort of landslip, full of stones and ragwort. You climb down that. And there you are. Or, of course, if you go the *other* way, there's Wingbarrow Bay."

"Yes," said Mr. Thompson, "that was where I bathed yesterday."

"That's where Barker often goes. She was there last week. She swam round Wingbarrow Nob."

"It must have been a wonderful swim."

"Oh, not bad, of course—on account of the currents. That's the worst of swimming about here. They're always changing. Would you like one of my apples?"

She threw one across to him, but he failed to catch it, and, bouncing upon the rock, it danced out into the pool.

Selina jeered.

"Butter-fingers!" she cried. "Now you'd better come and fetch it."

Mr. Thompson swept the landscape. The toque had disappeared.

"I've a jolly good mind to," he said, "so that I can come and pay you for being cheeky."

Selina had bestowed herself upon a boulder in mid-pool again.

"I bet you won't," she said, but he was already at his boot-laces. He rolled up his dark trousers above his knees and splashed across to her, picking up the apple. She slid down into the water, and so they stood for a moment looking down at their reflections, her feet beside his grown strangely flowerlike. And it was then, from behind the buttress that had concealed Selina, that there emerged the toque upon a flushed mademoiselle.

"Selina," she screamed, "how *dare* you? Oh, *mon Dieu*, oh, wicked one!"

The two persons in the pool confronted her together.

"You know *très bien* that I 'ave forbid you," shouted the ineffective Mademoiselle. Then she looked at Mr. Thompson with a gesture of abandonment.

"It is the catarrh—in 'er nose," she explained, "and I 'ave strictly forbid 'er."

"But then you see," said Selina, "I hardly *ever* get a chance of paddling with an Assistant Priest."

Mr. Thompson, having thus become vaguely the offender, waded out gingerly to establish happier relations.

"I'm very sorry," he said, "if I have seemed to encourage her."

"*Ma foi, mais c'est 'eart-breaking,*" said Mademoiselle. "She is 'olly unmanageable, and I shall give 'er away."

"I had no idea," said Mr. Thompson, "that she had a cold in her head."

"She should be sent away to school," said Mademoiselle. "She should be whipped every day."

"Oh, I *say*," cried Selina, "steady on, Mademoiselle."

"And the men only encourage you," flamed the governess at Mr. Thompson, "even you that I thought was only just a little *curé*."

Mr. Thompson noted the distinction without enthusiasm; and at the same moment there approached them, from the Wingbarrow side, a grey-haired philosopher with twinkling spectacles.

"Dear me, dear me, dear me," he said, "what's all the trouble about?"

"Ah," said Mademoiselle, "it is the doctor. He will understand. *Mais non*, let me alone speak. *Elle s'est enrhumée et elle s'en va nu-pieds*" —the doctor looked down at them gravely. "She 'as the catarrh—and I 'ave forbid 'er *absolument* —*et voilà*," she caught up a handful of Selina's skirt for medical horror, "so-aked—while she goes bathing with the *curé*."

"Well, really, Mr. Thompson——" began Dr. Lennox, but Selina interrupted him.

"Of course," she said, "poor Mr. Thompson's not *entirely* to blame."

"No," said Dr. Lennox, "I don't suppose that he is."

"He ought to have noticed, perhaps, that I'd

got a cold in the head," she sniffed once or twice, "but you know men don't—except medical men, of course."

Mr. Thompson was sitting down again, and pulling on his socks. Dr. Lennox coughed a little impressively.

"And now look here, my dear," he said, wagging his head at Selina, "you've got to remember that I know you very well. It was I who brought you to Windy in my black bag."

"Oh, my godfather," said Selina, "you don't think I'm as young as all that?"

"Eh?" said Dr. Lennox. "As young as all what?"

"Well, of course," said Selina gently, "I'm most frightfully obliged to you for your professional assistance to my late mother."

"Middle stump," admitted Dr. Lennox, with sportsmanlike promptitude, "only you really mustn't talk like that. Eh, Mademoiselle? Discipline, my dear, that's what *you* need. Eh, Mr. Thompson, don't you agree to that?"

"Of course," said Selina, "I'm completely at your mercy. You can spank me blue if you really want to. There are quite enough of you."

"Oh, dear me, no," said Dr. Lennox; "no need for anything heroic—just a slight shade of pink would suffice."

He pulled out his watch.

"And now," he said, "Mam'zelle, if you really do want to take Miss Selina home, and if Mr. Thompson really does want to have a bathe,

why, we'll all go along together, and I'll take him down to the Gull's Nest. There'll be just time before lunch."

"But I haven't got a towel," smiled Mr. Thompson.

"A towel!" cried the doctor, waving his hand towards the sun. "Good lord, man, what's that for? Neither have I."

They parted with Selina and Mademoiselle where the coastguards' cottages abut on the road to Windy; and the doctor, walking briskly, led along a path beside the coast. It was marked, every now and then, with white lumps of chalk, guides for the darkness and stormy weather; and just below its last climb over the vertex of Driver Head they came upon the declivity that Selina had mentioned. It had been evidently, in the past, some gash of tempest, less, perhaps, than fifty years old, but already partly healed below grafts of wiry turf, and now brilliant with ragwort, wild-carrot, campion, and bugloss, and little flowers that Mr. Thompson did not know—eye-bright and rock-rose. Presently, however, as they descended, the cleft widened into a bleaker area of boulders and soft shingle, through which a narrow footway now declared itself, leading to some coral-red sand. And here it became obvious how this inlet had won its name. For on their right, as they came down to the water's edge, towered the tall rock-front of Driver Head, about which cried a ceaseless chorus of gulls, beating to and fro on their muscular wings.

This front was not unclimbable, as the doctor

now pointed out; and in his younger days he had ascended it more than once. At low tide, too, it was possible to scramble round its foot into the wider cavity of Basin Pool.

"It's possible to get in there with a dive," explained the doctor, shedding his garments as he spoke, "but I'm generally too busy to go round so far. So I just slip down here in odd moments, and take my dives off one of those," and he nodded to some slabs of rock about fifty yards from the shore.

Then he stood for a moment stretching his arms in the sunlight, his body a little plumper, as he confessed, than it ought to be, but with the muscles of his football years still firm and energetic.

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Thompson, "that diving's not my strong point."

The doctor ran a trained eye over his face and physique.

"Well, come out and have a try," he said, splashing down into the water. "Why, hullo, there's somebody ahead of us."

And indeed, at that moment, a spare figure, naked like themselves, had crawled out of the ocean upon the rock to which they were swimming. The doctor, with his powerful trudgeon stroke, was out-distancing Mr. Thompson, but he rolled over a little and laughed back at him as he swam, his head, as it seemed, more than half under water.

"I believe it's our friend the lord bishop," he spluttered, while Mr. Thompson, in his wake, saw that this was indeed the case—that the bishop was already squatting boyishly on one of the rocks;

and that a ring gleamed from his finger as he waved his hand.

"Morning, Lennox," he cried; "good-morning, Mr. Thompson."

But it was the first time that Mr. Thompson had ever seen a naked bishop; or indeed, since boyhood, so bathed himself. And in spite of the infection of the bishop's laughter, the *bonhomie* of the doctor, and the indulgent splendour of the day, he felt, and could not wholly, perhaps, conceal, a certain sentiment of distress. That bishops beneath their robes were indeed as other men he knew, of course, theoretically, as well as anybody else. But he felt now as if he were witnessing the betrayal of some high secret by a priest who was wilfully disregarding its value—and that being naked himself, he was an accessory after the fact. So he remained for a minute in the water, supporting himself on the edge of the rock, while the other two, dripping upon its surface, stood chattering there quite unashamed—the bishop, in fact, comparing himself rather ruefully with the robust thews of the doctor. And then, feeling a little cold, he drew himself up beside them.

"A second occasion for humility," smiled the bishop, looking up at him. "I must really be swimming back again to the protection of my gaiters."

"But where are they?" inquired the doctor. "I never spotted your clothes."

"Round the corner," said the bishop, "in Basin Pool. I was bicycling along the coast,

and old Neptune was too much for me. But I've faithfully promised to get back to lunch. So, *au revoir*," he cried, and dived back into the water.

The doctor and Mr. Thompson remained watching him for a minute, and then, in succession, they followed his example.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," said the doctor, as Mr. Thompson came up again to the surface; and indeed, if he had been thinking about it, the dive would probably have been clumsier. They clambered up for another, and the bishop, who by then was just rounding the Head, waved them a last greeting before he disappeared.

"Well, and what do you think of his lordship?" asked the doctor with a smile.

"He's certainly—eccentric," said Mr. Thompson.

"Ah, do you think so?" said the doctor. "But with respect to what centre?"

"Centre?" said Mr. Thompson, but the doctor had dived in again, and when he reappeared he shook the water from his eyes, and said that it was time to be getting inshore.

"I fancy that I'd diagnose him as real, though," he said presently, as they stood drying.

"Who?"

"Why, the lord bishop."

Mr. Thompson looked puzzled.

"In what sense?" he inquired.

The doctor glanced at him, for a moment, as if hesitating a little in purpose; and then, with a gesture by no means unfriendly, he pinched up a portion of Mr. Thompson's right arm.

"In the sense," he said gently, "that this ought to be muscle."

Mr. Thompson winced.

"But I thought," he said, "that you were speaking—spiritually."

Even to himself the words sounded curious; and for a moment the doctor looked surprised.

"Well, so I was," he said slowly, "so I am."

II

After tea Mr. Thompson sat down in his study to finish his letter in time for the evening post.

"And, oddly enough," he wrote, "since writing this last sentence, I have again met both Dr. Lennox and the bishop. In fact, we had a bathe together; and they seemed very friendly; though as yet I must say that I don't quite understand them. The weather continues perfect, and I am already very sunburnt. To-morrow afternoon there is to be a sale of work in the colonel's garden for some mission to Liverpool van-boys. It is not a church mission, but I suppose that I shall have to go. On Sunday morning I hope to give my sermon about Goliath; and I am keeping Job for the evening, when the congregation seems likely to be larger—'Oh that I knew where I might find him.' This is rather a powerful appeal; and I think that it is my best piece of work. Some day, I hope you will be able to hear it. With much love, Your aff. son. A. T."

And yet, perhaps, even apart from its editing of the facts, this letter was not quite a true

reflection of its writer. In the evening, at any rate, he became a little depressed, for he knew, as he smoked in the silence after supper, that the events of the week had not been so entirely satisfactory. With the Cossingtons, it was true, he had perhaps bettered his position, though Mrs. Cossington had elicited from him the quite unnecessary information that his mother lived in lodgings in Shepherd's Bush. But that remark of Mademoiselle's remained peculiarly irritating; while the attitude both of the bishop and of the doctor continued to suggest some reserve.

He knocked the ashes from his pipe, and rose up to bolt the front-door. But his perplexity still clung to him as he climbed upstairs. Then he pulled up his blind, and looked out of the window; whence, far off, above a lake of magic, he saw the red light in an upper room at Windy. He wound up his watch, and noticed that it was midnight; and he thought that the window might belong to Berenice.

"She's keeping late hours," he smiled—and then, even as he looked, the light went out, and the house with it.

He moved back to the looking-glass, and unbuttoned his collar.

"I wonder," he said, as it became to-morrow
"I wonder if they think I'm a *rotter*."

CHAPTER XII

I

THAT Mr. Thompson did not believe this to be a serious possibility may, perhaps, be at once admitted. But, on the other hand, that he should have made the remark at all seems, in retrospect, to contain a certain significance—to suggest that some process was already at work, even prior to the incident that must now be related. That its efforts had hitherto been merely tentative, and indeed, for the most part, entirely misunderstood, would of course be equally true. And it is certain that Mr. Thompson awoke the next morning, composed in body and confident in mind.

This day, being Saturday, he had dedicated chiefly to the revision of the two sermons that he was to deliver on the morrow; and after a hearty breakfast and a pipe in the vicarage garden he settled himself down for this purpose. But when a sermon has already been well thought out, when experience has polished it and time lent it a flavour, the labour of memorising it is not very arduous; so that Mr. Thompson's task became very little more than to lean back in his chair, and deliver it, after his own method, to an imaginary audience.

Once or twice, it is true, he would get up, and

cross the room to rehearse a gesture before the mirror upon the wall; while a simile here and there must be discreetly altered to appeal the better to a rustic congregation. But he was not greatly disturbed when a reminder was handed to him from an old lady at Stack, who expected the Holy Sacrament to be administered to her that morning—an errand that would employ him until it was time for lunch, and from which he returned with an excellent appetite. In the afternoon, too, he had to appear at the colonel's sale of work, where his services, in the almost entire absence of his sex, were commanded later for the distribution of refreshments. And a visit to a sick man rounded off the daylight.

It was not, therefore, until supper had been cleared away that he again found himself cloistered with his sermons—the first about Goliath, needing little more attention; but the second still awaiting its preliminary canter. To this one, as he had suggested in his letter to Mummy, he attached a rather considerable importance. It was a sermon less of event than of emotion; and because of this he had reserved it for the evening, when he expected a fuller church, and when the approach of twilight would lend to it, as always, its peculiar dramatic reinforcement.

“Oh, that I knew where I might find him”—with the shadows falling and the hours of darkness at hand. “Oh, that I knew—eh, hullo?”

Ann Byng appeared unexpectedly at the door.

“Well, what is it?” he asked crossly. “A note from the colonel?”

He opened it, and read it through.

"Is anybody waiting?" he asked.

"Only the maid, sir," said Ann.

"Well, say that I shall be delighted."

She closed the door and withdrew; and he stood for a moment smiling into the mirror, his bronzed reflection not unpleasant to contemplate, and the colonel's invitation to Sunday supper still gleaming in his right hand.

"Coming round a bit, eh?" he mused, and then reflected that this particular sermon ought rather to please the bigoted old warrior.

"I might even," he suggested, "make it a little more personal."

He bent an evangelical brow upon the gentleman in the looking-glass.

"Have you found Him?" he asked. . . .

II

The little repeater clock on the study mantelpiece had a clear and rather musical bell; and this was now struck nine times. Almost at the same moment a cyclist in the road outside dismounted, having yet some miles to travel, and set a match to his lamp-wick before proceeding on his journey. For although the sunset redness was merely veiling itself with silver, and though presently the dusk of this between-light would brighten rather than fade, the local police had latterly shown signs of increasing vigilance. He mounted again with two raspings of his boot-sole upon a surface that needed re-metalling; and as he did so, a brake overtook

him, filled with tourists returning to Duckmouth. They were in high spirits, and one of them was singing; and their voices were still faint on the air when the latch of the kitchen gate fell behind the colonel's servant. She stopped for a moment, and said a word or two to a small girl, who was being careful with a jug; and then presently, in opposite directions, their light footsteps dissolved into stillness—into the shell of stillness that the world was, with the sea in it, far off, like a ghost.

And all the while the gentleman—the absurd gentleman in the looking-glass—stood staring at Mr. Thompson, frozen, as it were, half-way in the middle of an effective gesture. He might almost have been a marionette. He *was* only a marionette. And like this he would be standing up to-morrow uttering the words that it had been arranged for him to speak—that is, if something disastrous had not happened; if—if the works had not gone horribly wrong . . . and yet somehow, by a devastating assumption, this creature was all the time Mr. Thompson.

He stared at it with blank eyes.

"Have *you* found Him?" . . . but how could a thing like this even begin to find anything at all?

"Good lord," said Mr. Thompson, "I must be ill. I must be ill."

And yet he had heard the bicyclist and the brake and the small girl, who was being careful with the jug; just as now, when these had become silent, he could hear the patience, the infinite patience of the sea.

"Oh, for God's sake," he said angrily, and turned his back abruptly upon the looking-glass.

It had been a dislocating moment. It must remain largely unexplainable. And the historian is no less glad than was Mr. Thompson to turn away from it to something more concrete—to the manuscript notes of a sermon, for instance, even though nightfall was making them difficult to read.

"I must get a light," said Mr. Thompson. "I can't see them properly. I shan't alter them."

Ann Byng knocked at the door again.

"Come in," he said, in a voice that seemed to him affected, and she came in with the lit reading-lamp in her hand. It was duplicated for a moment in the mirror, as she paused to move a chair.

"I thought you'd be ready for it," she said, "though the days is still keeping long."

"I think that I shall be going out," said Mr. Thompson, who had not thought of it before.

"Well, it's a wonderful fine night," she agreed. "It's a wonderful fine moonlight night."

He was watching her, half sitting upon the back of his chair.

"You did ought to make up a fine sermon, sir," she said, "on a fine moonlight night like this."

Then he left her to clear the things away—the cup of tea that she had brought to him after supper; for, after all, there is no place like the open air in which to finish up a sermon, and to

deliver its most fervid periods, secure from these hopeless interruptions.

"I shan't alter it," he said to himself again. "I shall let it go just as it is"—and there backed a flat creature in front of him, who agreed that this course would be wise—a Mr. Thompson with an evangelical brow and an arm half extended in appeal. He mimicked Mr. Thompson in the village, as he lifted his hand to salute a labourer; and he mocked Mr. Thompson on the down, as he raised his hat to Miss Sary.

"Have *you* found Him?"—the words drummed in his ears.

"Damn the sermon," he said. "I won't think about it again."

He struck out across the down towards the coast, as across a sheet of the palest metal, his shadow half in front of him like a blot, and his feet falling silently as in stockings.

"I won't think about it," he said. "Why should I?"—and then it dropped down again into his mind—like something frail from between the stars.

"But *have* you found Him? Have you ever found anything?"—and the conviction came to birth in him, even then, that he would have to think this out to an answer; that the answer compelled from him would be a real one; and that already he knew what it would be. A rabbit bolted suddenly from his feet, and fled away from him over the grass like a phantom.

"Good lord," he said again, "I must really really pull myself together"—and the very

expression was almost startling. It so exactly suggested what seemed wrong with him—the fact that himself had got away from him; was that thing that he had seen in the looking-glass; that would be preaching in church to-morrow morning; and that had pushed itself, and preached for all these years.

“By Jove,” he said, thrusting it away from him with an effort, “by Jove, what a heavenly night!”

He took off his soft clerical hat, and rubbed his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief. Unconsciously, too, he must have been walking very fast, for he was now upon the edge of the cliff, down which, as he stood still for a moment, a coastguard came swinging towards him.

He touched his cap in respect to the sky-pilot; and Mr. Thompson warmed to him, and detained him.

“Good-evening,” he said, “it’s a fine night”—and the coastguard agreed that this was so. Mr. Thompson looked about him for conversation, looked westward over the motionless channel. He pointed to a tiny thread of light, moving slowly away into the darkness.

“The *Hannibal*, sir; first-class battleship, just putting out of Duckmouth for manœuvres,” and the coastguard rolled cheerily towards the cottages, a strip of black in the valley below them.

For a minute or two, scarcely for longer, his passing had dissipated the loneliness. But now it crept back again into place, like the sea above a drowned man’s body. If it had not been for the mirror there, he would have returned home. But

as it was he climbed higher along the path, for the air here was cooler, with some wind; and at least he was conscious of his muscles.

"I'm strong enough," he assured himself, "I shall soon get over this"—and then presently the surface of the cliff flattened a little, shutting away from him all human light.

It was the head of the Gull's Nest crack; and he stopped there again, looking down, over the feathery black tufts of ragwort, the boulders, and the ocean beyond—a faintly moving reflection of the night, with a broad ribbon of ivory melted into it. Just here, too, the formation of the coast had created a back-current in the land breeze; and it brought up to him, as he stood there hesitating, an unexpected sharp odour of sea-weed. He could hear also, for the first time distinctly, the rise and fall of the water on the sand.

"It'll do me good," he said. "I'll go down there. It'll set me right."

He clambered down, half running and sometimes sliding; and at the water's edge he dipped his hand into the foam. He made a cup, and lifted some of it to his forehead. It was quite warm, even warmer than the air; and the flat-topped little rocks stood into shore, clear-cut, with the healthy memories of yesterday. He began impulsively to strip off his clothes.

"It'll do me good," he reflected, "it's just what I want."

He remembered some instructions of the doctor.

"Arms straight," he said, "and don't bend your knees; and turn your palms up when you get

below the surface. I must practise that. I must try and get good at it."

He swam out towards the rock, and felt better.

"Thank goodness," he said, "this is just what I wanted. If I were ill, I couldn't be swimming like this."

His strokes seemed stronger and more certain than they had ever been. He seemed to reach the rock more quickly than before. He seemed to reach it with ridiculous ease.

"I'll have my dives," he thought, "on the way back. It's pleasanter in the water than out."

He struck out into the new water beyond, looking back, now and then, to the coast, with a discoverer's eye. He wondered if he would be strong enough to swim, as the bishop had done, round the Head into Basin Pool. But he did not know how far this would be; and he remembered what Selina had said about currents. He would swim, instead, just beyond the shadow of the cliff. He would float a little in that liquid moonlight. He drew in great lungfuls of air, and in a minute or two felt the land breeze upon his neck. He turned over, and began to swim upon his back so that he might see, above the edge of the cliff, the moon rising over him as he swam. He set it for a talisman against what haunted him. When he saw it, he said, it should exorcise this, and make him whole once more. And then, on his back, his progress became too slow, and he rolled over again, pushing forward upon his breast; which was how he missed the moon's appearing until it hung above him immeasurably withdrawn—no longer glowing, but

bloodless, a dead thing bleached like a bone. It chilled him with a kind of machine-born horror. It did not even ask him a question. It looked down upon him as an idol might have looked down upon a doll that had been cast before its feet.

"I'm getting cold," he said, "I must turn back again."

And then, as he set his face towards the shore, a little wave rose up and slapped against his mouth, and another, and another, and another.

III

He knew very soon that he would never get back again; that, ignorant of tides and currents, and misjudging his own skill as a swimmer, he had swum out—no great way, but too far; and that the wind and this unexpected opposition of little waves was already robbing him fast of his strength.

Subtly, too, the whole coast seemed to have shifted a little to the westward; so that now he was no longer opposite the opening of the Gull's Nest, but on a level with the dark precipice of Driver Head. And twice he had half swallowed and half inhaled bitter mouthfuls of sickly salt water. His breath began to come hoarsely and with an effort, and his swimming muscles, especially those of his shoulders, were already aching with every stroke.

"I shall never do it," he said. "I mustn't hurry"—and he turned over again to try swimming on his back.

This rested him, and taking a line by two stars, he seemed to be making more hopeful progress. His

breathing became easier; and, as it did so, his mind grew clearer and more calm. Somewhere far down in him, too, there began forming itself a new and exacting resolution. It had identified the gentleman in the looking-glass; and it was building for him a bar of judgment. Into the blackness of the sky Mr. Thompson stared up.

"That's what I am," he said, "just that—just that."

Then he rolled back again upon his breast, and saw that all this time he had lost distance; that he had been purchasing his ease at a price; and that he was farther from the shore than ever. He swam desperately for half a dozen strokes, and seemed for a moment to have made a little headway; and then the vigour slipped out of his muscles, and they became flaccid, and refused to obey him.

"It's no good," he said, "I'm done for. This is the end of me."

He grew colder, and his eyes darkened, and the water ran in again over his lips. He thought of Mummy and her poor face of agony, with the pride of her heart snatched away from her. He was swimming vaguely now, swimming anyhow and anywhere. It did not matter. And except, perhaps, in an animal sense to Mummy, there was nothing in him that had ever mattered in the least—any more than a clothes-peg mattered, or a wax-work that to-morrow could replace. He lifted a haggard face again to the sky; and the moon's eye, infinitely blasé, stared down upon him with a bland impartiality. While beyond the moon

and behind the stars there was nothing—but a Word to which he had learned to say words. . . .

IV

And it was just then that a placid voice hailed him, very respectful, but with undertones of amusement.

"Hullo," it said, "good-evenin'—good-evenin', Mr. Thompson."

He said to her, "I'm done for. I'm drowning"—and two strokes of her arm brought her beside him. He saw its roundness and the strong ease of its movement; and then the girl's face close to his own, with the warm blood unperturbed in her cheeks. He saw that she was Berenice Chote, and that her eyes were inquiring but unalarmed. She might almost have been proffering him life, like a match from a box that was full of them. He drank confidence from her, deeply, like a draught.

"What's up?" she said. "Feeling a bit crampy? How bad are you? Put a hand on my shoulder."

Her strength overflowed into him as she swam.

"It was the current," he said. "I couldn't get back."

"Where've you come from?" she asked, "The Gull's Nest?"

"The Gull's Nest," he panted. "I'm a rotten bad swimmer."

"Well, I can't take you back there," she said, "you're too lumpy. You'll have to come in here."

They were swimming a diagonal course, half with

and half across the flow of the water; and already they were drawing visibly nearer to the rocks.

"You've saved my life," he said. "I was just going under."

"Shift your hand a little," she said, "between my shoulders."

He felt their firm muscles contracting.

"Are you all right?" she said. "It's only a little way."

They were out of the moonlight now, in the dark water of Basin Pool; and he saw her white profile against it as she turned a little to ask him the question.

"I'm all right," he said. "Am I being too much for you?"

She noticed that his voice had grown weak.

"Roll over," she suggested. "Take it easy."

She made a cup with her hands for his head, swimming upon her back beneath him, and pushing them both into shore with her feet. The current was no longer influencing them now; and through the still water their progress became quicker.

"I think I could swim now," he said.

"Better not," she advised, "we're almost there."

They came presently to a flat ledge of rock, and he put both hands upon it, holding himself up, above—though he did not know it—five hundred feet of water. She climbed ashore with cheerful alacrity; but when he tried to follow her his muscles gave way. He felt his heart, like something very small, ticking breathlessly somewhere under his arm-pit.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, "I'm afraid I can't."

She bent over him, crooking her arms beneath his shoulders.

"Heave O!" she laughed—until at last, with bruised knees, he felt the rock heaving dizzily beneath him. He crouched there, fighting for his breath; and then, seeing her bare foot beside him, he drooped forward, and touched it with his lips.

"Look here," she said, "what about your clothes?"

For the first time he remembered that he was naked. She stood looking at him, meditating for a moment.

"Look here," she said, "I'll shove my things on, and fetch them round for you."

She returned to him with her towel and a sweater.

"You'd better wrap yourself up a bit," she said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

He thanked her with chattering teeth, his heart still racing and stopping short. She returned in twenty minutes, and found him huddled against a rock.

"I'm afraid," she said, "you're most awfully cold. But it's such a hell of a long way round."

She stopped short with his clergyman's coat in her fingers.

"I'll clear out," she said apologetically, "till you're ready to made a start."

He remembered then that it was to exact from her just this reverence that he had put forth all

his powers last Sunday; and when she came back again, the fruit of his labours became even more apparent. For now she stood looking at him just as he had always wanted her to stand; and he saw that he had put on holiness in her sight. He saw that it still hung from his shoulders like a crime. The humility of her friendly eyes tortured him.

"You mustn't," he said sharply, "I'm not what you think."

"Let me give you an arm," she volunteered, "I'm afraid it'll be a pretty steep climb."

They crept slowly up a sort of natural staircase.

"You've saved my life," he repeated.

"Oh, I'm often swimmin' out there," she said, "in the summer."

"I had given myself up," he said.

And then, on the top of the cliff—on the soft turf outside Windy—Berenice and the new world behind her dwindled quietly into an empty darkness.

V

Down the road from Stack throbbed a motor-car. Berenice hailed it, and Dick stopped with all his brakes. He surveyed Mr. Thompson with distaste.

"What's all this about?" he inquired as he dismounted.

Berenice explained to him briefly.

"Good lord!" said Dick, "he might have drowned you both."

They lifted him into the car between them, his head nodding from side to side.

"You might try and keep him off the clutch," said Dick politely.

Berenice glanced at him quickly, amused by the revelation in his voice; and while her knowledge of Mr. Thompson's sanctity still safeguarded him from her own criticism, Dick's human prejudices were not without their effect. They conferred a temporary humanity even upon Mr. Thompson, to be kept from annoying Dick's by the muscular exercise of her own; so that being thus all human together she might as well, it seemed, exact her price for this. She remembered how he had kissed her foot.

"He was really rather sweet about it," she said.

"You don't mean it," said Dick.

He steered the car, with some difficulty, to the bottom of the steps, where Mr. Thompson, opening his eyes vaguely, proclaimed his ability to walk home. They helped him out, and with Ponsonby's assistance conveyed him into the flag-stoned hall. He tried to stand for a moment, but reeled again, and would have fallen to the ground. They put him in a chair, and Ponsonby disappeared for some brandy. Dick stood still, looking down upon him with the cool scrutiny of health. Berenice walked across the hall to the recess where there was a telephone.

"You're mistaken," said Mr. Thompson suddenly. "You're altogether mistaken. I'm not—I'm not—what you think."

The words, spoken so clearly, brought Berenice round a little towards the speaker, her hand upon the telephone, and her eyes rather puzzled.

Dick transferred his examination from Mr. Thompson to herself; and meeting his gaze she saw that he would have asked her a question, if Ponsonby had not just then returned with a tumbler. It would have been an impertinent question; but she saw that nevertheless he would have put it to her. And the expression that had come to his eyes again arrested her attention. It seemed to join hands, in a fashion that was difficult to explain, with the look that the world had worn, as she had encountered it last Sunday evening. She felt older for it and more powerful, and with a power that was being recognised. Down the staircase came Bill, whistling contentedly to himself. He caught sight of the several persons making their tableau in the hall.

"Hullo," he said quickly, "what's been happenin' here?"

With his father away in London for the weekend, he began half consciously to play the master a little. It was as though, by an odd chance, they had all become older together.

"It's Barker's parson," said Dick, "she's just pulled him out of the water."

Mr. Thompson, turning blue, slipped down again from his chair. They laid him on the rug, with a coat beneath his head; and, Berenice being still at the telephone, Dick became her historian.

"Devilish romantic," said Bill, when he had heard the end of the story. "Devilish romantic—eh, what?"

CHAPTER XIII

I

FEW Romances, however, seem to be possible without a doctor, at one stage or another of their duration, though Medicine is perhaps their exact antithesis, and looks upon them with a cold eye. Thus tears to it are little more than NaCl in some water; and it advances to meet despair with calomel, not altogether unsupported, alas, by experience.

In the present instance, the happier diagnosis of Dr. Lennox was no more than a temporary cardiac dilatation, the result of a too sudden demand upon untrained, but quite sound heart-muscle. And although, calling again early next morning, he shook his head a little over a temperature of 102 degrees, he still adhered, on the whole, to his original optimism—that a few days' rest should set everything right.

Berenice stood awaiting instructions.

"I suppose," she said, "that he'd better stay here, hadn't he?"

"Well, of course," said Dr. Lennox, "it would be wiser, just at present."

They both glanced again at the patient, who was in no position to make a choice, but seemed

concentrated, for the moment, upon certain mysterious denials.

"I'm not that," he reiterated, "I'm not at all what she's thinking. I'm not holy. I'm not good——" with Berenice listening to him honestly bewildered.

There were other functions, too, to which attention must be paid. And though both Ponsonby and the footman had done their clumsy best, they were unanimous in admitting it to be a particularly poor one; while the domestics, upon the feminine side, declared themselves to be entirely incompetent. Dr. Lennox rubbed his chin, and glanced inquiringly at Berenice.

"It hardly seems worth while," he said, "to send for a professional. How about Sary—just for a day or two?"

"I wish she would," said Berenice gratefully.

They went downstairs to the hall.

"And what about the services in church?" remembered the doctor. "I suppose it's our duty to let somebody know."

Berenice felt the vortex-pull of unexpected responsibilities; and Dr. Lennox, perceiving this, reassured her with a chuckle.

"Oh, I expect," he said, "we can fix that up all right."

This was before breakfast, after which, by arrangement with Colonel Lincoln Trent, the bishop, who was still at Creel, was consulted over the telephone. He promised, in this emergency, to officiate at Kilridge; and in the afternoon, having done so, he walked up to Windy with the

doctor. It was a still, tropical day, of open doors and sun-blinds; and the two of them were shown into a corner of the garden, whence Berenice from a hammock, with Dick Bolton and Bill, emerged somnolently to give them a greeting

"Dick told us," she said to the bishop, "that you'd been stayin' with his people."

"Oh, I'm staying there now," he said, holding her hand. And if he had created any awkwardness by thus paying a visit to a house that his host somewhat markedly shunned, it was certainly not in the breasts of Berenice and Bill.

"By George," said Bill genially, "I should think it's the first time that we've ever had a real live bishop up here—what?"

He looked about him for confirmation of this.

"What about old Aloysius Chote of Chichester?" said the bishop.

"Ah," said Bill vaguely, "yes, b'George, I'd forgotten him. I s'pose he might have blown in now an' again. But not into the present old shanty—what?"

"I hear," smiled the bishop to Berenice, "that you've been making yourself responsible for our locum's life."

Berenice coloured a little under her tan.

"Mere fluke," she said. "I mean my comin' across him. It was an easy enough job just to pull him in."

"How is he now, do you know?"

"Sleepin' like a top," said Bill. "Oh—lord."

His lack of polish has more than once been indicated; and now he retreated quite frankly

through the laurels. Across the lawn, heralded by a junior maid-servant, stepped the Rev^d. Algernon and Mrs. Cossington.

Mrs. Cossington fluttered a little in advance.

"How do you do, Miss Chote?" she began apologetically. "You must really forgive this visitation. But we were *so* anxious about our friend Mr. Thompson. How do you do, my lord? And you, Mr. Bolton, and Dr. Lennox?"

"And do let me tender you," said the Rev^d. Algernon, "my *profoundest* regards for your heroism."

"I can't think *how* you can have managed it," said Mrs. Cossington.

"Oh, it was quite easy," said Berenice, "I've just been tellin' the bishop."

"Ah," said Mrs. Cossington with a smile, "but then his lordship's such a great swimmer himself. Now to us—to us it seems wonderful—and so *brave* too"—she lifted a warning finger. "No, I refuse to listen to any excuses. It *was* brave. Wasn't it, my lord?"

Berenice looked obviously uncomfortable. The doctor and Dick Bolton had retired, ostensibly to see the patient, and for a reinforcement of chairs. Selina sauntered into action round the curve of a syringa bush.

"How do you do?" she said. "You're Mrs. Cossington, aren't you? I think this is the first time you've been to see us?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Cossington. "Yes, it is."

She turned again to Berenice.

"And what a lovely old place it is!"

The bishop and Mr. Cossington were talking to each other. Selina glanced at them, but remained where she was.

"We had no idea," she continued sympathetically, "that Mr. Thompson was such a great friend of yours. Had we, Barker dear?"

"Eh?" said Mrs. Cossington. "Well—er—of course, in *that* sense—I mean, of course, we only know him as a clerical new-comer. By the way, how *is* Mr. Thompson?"

"Asleep," said Berenice.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Cossington. "Ah!"

"I suppose," said Selina inquiringly, "that's rather a good symptom, isn't it?"

Mrs. Cossington nodded smilingly, as one does to rather forward little girls, who belong, however, to territorial families.

"And I'm told that he is *quite* a good preacher," she said tentatively to Berenice.

"Berenice was *tremendously* struck with him," murmured Selina.

"Ah, indeed?" said Mrs. Cossington. "How long do you suppose he will have to stay here?"

"I don't know," said Berenice, "not very long, I hope."

Mrs. Cossington bent forward a little.

"Ah!" she said, "I quite understand. It's always a little—*difficile*, with a stranger, isn't it?"

Berenice stared at her for a moment—possibly translating.

"Yes," she said at last, "I suppose it is."

Mrs. Cossington smoothed a crease from her skirt.

"And especially if he isn't—but I think Mr. Thompson *is* a gentleman, don't you?"

Berenice opened her eyes a little.

"I should have thought so," she said. "I haven't asked him."

"Of course," sighed Mrs. Cossington, "he's not a *University* man."

"Nor's Bill," put in Selina sadly.

"But nowadays that doesn't really *mean* so much."

"I'm afraid," said Selina, "we're awfully ignorant about it," but suggesting a desire for enlightenment.

"Of course," said Mrs. Cossington, "it always makes one feel *safer*."

With a corner of her eye she collected the bishop's.

"We were talking," she said, "about the University."

"Indeed," said the bishop, "which particular one?"

Mrs. Cossington smiled with playful reproach.

"There are surely only two," she said, "or so Algy always tells me. But we were saying that things were more elastic than they used to be."

"Elastic?" puzzled the bishop.

"I mean that it is no longer, perhaps, quite such a *hall-mark* to have been to Oxford or Cambridge. We were speaking apropos poor Mr. Thompson."

"I see," said the bishop unhelpfully.

"Even in the army, too, my brother tells me there's quite a mixture."

"Oh, quite," said Mr. Cossington mournfully.
"Oh, quite."

"Even in the sixty-ninth?" asked Selina.

"That *is* my brother's regiment," said Mrs. Cossington.

"Oh re-ally?" said Selina. "Did you hear that, Barker dear? Mrs. Cossington has a brother in the sixty-ninth."

But it was one of Selina's sorrows that her relations either would not, or were never able to back her up.

"I know," said Berenice shortly. "I've heard it before"

"Lovely old copper beech," said Mrs. Cossington tactfully, steering the conversation away from herself, as a well-bred woman should.

Miss Sary came up to them from the house.

"Well," said Mrs. Cossington, "how's the poor invalid?"

"Temperature normal," said Miss Sary, "and the heart's apex beat just inside again."

"How clever you are," murmured Mrs. Cossington. "We have just been admiring," she added, "Miss Chote's very beautiful copper beech."

"Oh, it's not mine, you know," said Berenice.

Mrs. Cossington could not refrain from once more applauding her modesty.

"But you must really come and see *ours* one day. Must she not, Algy?"

"We should not only be delighted," said Mr. Cossington, "we should be honoured."

"*There!*" said Selina.

They both looked at her rather sharply, but her simplicity was patent. Dick Bolton strolled back again, and sat down beside them. There was a sense in which all the local clergy were of quite considerable importance.

"Yes, I remember it very well," he said; "or, let me see, was it wet when I called?"

"We had tea under it, I think," said Mrs. Cossington, making room for him.

"So we did," said Dick, "I thought that I wasn't mistaken. Quite an old one, too, if I remember rightly."

The bishop had gone indoors to see Mr. Thompson.

"Why, there's daddy," chirped Selina, who had wandered on to the lawn.

The Cossington conversation began perceptibly to waver.

"I wonder who he's brought *this* time," mused Selina, half aloud.

The Cossingtons rose to their feet.

"Well, Miss Chote," said the Rev^d. Algernon, "we must really, I think, be getting home-wards."

It was just then that the servants began to bring the tea-tables.

"Won't you stay for some tea?" said Berenice politely.

"I think," said Selina, "that it must be Lollie Jameson over again."

"No, thank you, we mustn't *really*," said Mrs. Cossington.

They shook hands very warily.

"Why, I don't believe," cried Selina, "that it's daddy after all."

With inconceivable rapidity, Mr. Cossington's eye flashed an inquiry to his wife. But the act of renunciation had by now become irrevocable; and already one of the servants was standing poised to escort them. When they had gone Miss Sary called gently to Selina, between whom and herself reigned a sort of armed neutrality.

"Look me straight in the eye," commanded Miss Sary. But Selina, at a discreet distance, merely put out her tongue.

II

Upstairs, in a corner bedroom of the seaward wing of the house, Mr. Thompson leaned on his elbow, and gazed steadily at the bishop.

"Well," he said, "what do you think of it all?"

It was so still here, and the view through the open window lent to the little room such an air of detachment, that they might almost have been talking in some spiritual halting-place—independent both of Time and Matter. And Mr. Thompson had been relating, at first hand, and from the inside, most of the twelve chapters of this little narrative; not, perhaps, precisely as they have been written down here, but seen through the lens and from the deep waters of yesterday.

The bishop smiled a little.

"And here a sheer hulk lies poor Tom Bowling?" he said at last.

"Say a husk," said Mr. Thompson, "and a worshipper of husks."

"Still?" inquired the bishop.

"I'm the same man."

"Not quite, surely."

"I don't see why not."

"Well, you've made a discovery."

"If emptiness is a discovery."

"I should call it an important one."

"Have *you* ever looked at death so—so close as that?"

"Yes."

"And you could still go on preaching?"

"I'm not a very good hand at it."

"Living, then?"

"I had to."

"Believing?"

"I came to."

"Tell me what then. Tell me how."

"No man can do that."

"You leave me where I am, then—what I am—and knowing what I am?"

"I don't, because there's no stopping still."

"I speak to you as a priest. I have no God, and I have never had one. I was built for the part, and I dressed it—that was all. As a priest tell me, what am I to do?"

"I daren't."

"Why?"

"Because you will be told more truly."

"By whom?"

"You will find out."

"Dare I read prayers that I have never prayed?"

"You could come to pray them."

"To a Word?"

"It might become more than that."

"But until then—if it should ever happen?"

"What else would you do?"

Mr. Thompson was silent.

"I have a mother to support," he said at last.

"I suppose I could teach."

"Could you?"

He flushed a little.

"I mean unimportant things."

"Such as——?"

"Elementary Latin."

"You make a distinction, then?"

Mr. Thompson hesitated, his eyes upon the bishop's.

"Well—yes," he said, "I suppose I do."

"Did the husk?"

"It never thought about it."

"What, never?" smiled the bishop.

"Now and then, perhaps. You mean it—it wasn't a husk?"

"Not wholly, I should have thought."

"I must be real now."

"I think you will be."

"Nothing else is worth while."

"Nothing."

"And about next Sunday?"

"Next Sunday will come," said the bishop.

"Let it go at that just now."

He held out his hand.

"Pax vobiscum," he smiled.

But Mr. Thompson shook his head.

"Not peace," he said, "not peace, but a sword."

Then he stopped short. It was the last flicker in him of a rhetorician whom he had supposed to be dead. But by its light he found bed-rock, and stood upon it simply.

"You can see for yourself," he said; "the sort of man that I am."

III

But could he? When the bishop had gone, leaving silence behind him, the inadequacy of his self-revelation began painfully to declare itself. For though it was true that his visitor had seemed partly to understand, it was obvious that the data had not all been put before him. He had scarcely, indeed, known them himself, as they marshalled themselves now in the slow hours of his convalescence. For he had touched hands with death. But it seemed to him that he had done more. Clapsed by those icy fingers, he had been turned about, and compelled, as it were, for the first time to behold life—that slow wheel upon which the accidental dust of man rose from darkness into moonlight, and dropped again into darkness; that cold sea, so buoyant to the strong and to the weary so merciless; that unharnessed stream amidst which, with so sublime an ignorance, he had thought himself a rock for the uprearing of a palace. Possessed by his self-importance it was into this deep place that he had rushed down, to be shown here, as in a lightning flash, the blank

verge of all things—the grim chasm to which his little world was but a crust, and into which, moment by moment, it inexorably crumbled.

With the sick egotism of weakness, too, it seemed to him that he should have ended there; that to him alone of all men had it been given to be pulled back again—self-known for little other than the swine of legend, but with the trappings of divinity still clinging round his body. He saw them reflected again in Berenice's eyes, and behind her in the eyes of those countless others, the men and women who had listened to him during all these years. He rolled over on his pillow.

"Oh, God!" he said. "Oh, *God*, what have I done?"

And then, with a shudder, he seemed to be staring once more into that waxen moon, that pit of blackness, with never a God, when God had most been needed, but the chill, deliberate rhythm of the worlds. . .

But where then, and what *was* God? Putting aside, for a moment, the immediate problem of himself, he turned to the question almost with relief, as into a lecture-room out of life—as a man who had fought real battles might return, half casually, half for refreshment, to some long-ago school where he had once been pedagogue. Let him rest there to cool himself from the compulsory tumult of reality. And yet, even as he entered, he knew that this might not be so—that life had surged in with him, whether he would or not. For here, for in his case, the benches were still full.

His own confident assertions were still unblurred upon the blackboard. His reverent students were still copying them into their note-books. Presently they would take them home, no doubt, passing them on to other people—unknown to him, perhaps unborn, to be bread for their hunger; while only he, as it seemed to him, had been abroad to test their value, to behold them, as they really were, just chalk-marks for the duster.

New considerations, like continents, stood away from before his eyes. For so only, he reflected, had all living received their theology—from the gentle whisperings of mothers, who had been impressed by sermons like his own; from human fathers and teachers, commending the writings of their predecessors. Whatever might have happened in the far history of the race, in this way only were his contemporaries building their heavens and their God—out of the words of men's lips, and upon such pillars as himself. The slow irony of it stabbed him. And he saw now that there was no escape. With the stern flood that bore him onwards he would nevermore be able to trifle. It had merely thrust him into this apartment to burst it open to the universe. His own problem was humanity's; and to humanity he was responsible for it. It lay in it like brook-water carried down upon Niagara. It knew as little of it as brook-water that by chance has heard the thunder.

IV

Upon the everyday pillow of his bedroom at Windy he began to long for a wilderness and a

Pauline sojourn of readjustment. But a wilderness, alas, presupposes private means; and Pauline sojourns are not compatible with elderly mothers in the Sulgrave Road, who grow hungry thrice a day, and must be warmed and fed. His refitting for life's journey must be performed *en route*. And there, indeed, when he considered it, lay half the difficulty of the next step. Did he know God, he would repeat to himself, he could ask for nothing better than to proclaim Him—with humility and in penance for the pompous remembrances of yesterday. But as it was, with that vision of his, knowing himself dust going to dust, dare he stand again in the pulpit or before the altar of his church? He might pray, indeed, with every fibre of him, but what message could proceed from him? For this thing held. ~~He~~ must be real. That was the big thing that mattered. And there came back to him, as he lay there, a forgotten phrase of Father Matthews.

"We always know the big thing," he had said.
"We have never any doubt of it."

It came back to him suddenly like a cool hand upon his forehead. It was the word of a good friend to him; and next morning there came another. This was Wednesday, and it was Berenice who brought him the letter in person. She came into his room with her father, who had returned from London the night before. She was going away, she told him, to visit an old school friend at Eastbourne; and it became a big thing, as she shook hands with him, presently to tell her the truth about himself.

"As a comrade," wrote the bishop, "I beseech you to consider well any change in your calling. Till your doubts become certainties remain wisely where you are. Till you have thoroughly re-explored them trust your office and its temple. Your reality can at least do no more harm than your pretence has done; and at best it may yet do more than either of us can foresee. Forgive me if I blunder. But do not leave us till you must. And may the unknown God guide you, and endow you with His strength."

V

And yet, since at the last resort we must all step solitary into the ring, it was very tentatively that he returned to it in due course from Windy—whence you are to see him, a little shaky and with anxious eyes, taking that ribbon-road curving westward to Kilridge; but conscious, too, of a new and rather surprising element in his atmosphere.

What exactly this might be he was for some time puzzled to discover. And then, quite suddenly, he perceived that it was Honesty—only who would have guessed that it would prove so tonic? He drew it in with deep breaths and an astonishing sense of reinforcement; as though, with no longer any pretences to guard, a whole regiment of fresh supplies had been set at liberty in him for action. They were those old sentinels against trespassers that had now ceased to be necessary; and in the new crises of his life he would at least be stronger by so much.

One such crisis, indeed, occurred after Evensong

on the next Sunday, when the congregation had been disappointed, but, on the whole, very generous. Those halting sentences, that strange lack of self-assurance, were only natural, it said, after so perilous an immersion; and not more than two persons, perhaps, had perceived in them anything more than this. The colonel, however, who was one of them, felt stern duty incumbent upon him. Unconscious of anti-climax, he put his question with solemnity.

"Have you found Him yourself?" he asked referring to the sermon.

"No," said Mr. Thompson.

The colonel was taken aback.

"Then I—I don't quite understand your position," he said.

Mr. Thompson found himself replying with an unexpected steadiness.

"Hadh't you suspected it?" he asked.

And the colonel, being honest, had to confess that this was so.

"But surely you—you aren't satisfied with that?" he inquired eagerly.

"I have been trying to make that clear," said Mr. Thompson.

The colonel coughed a little.

"If any man——" he began, but Mr. Thompson interrupted him.

"I know that quite well," he said, "I know the whole alphabet and grammar of salvation."

The colonel opened his mouth once or twice.

"You're forgetting," pursued Mr. Thompson, "that I'm a professional."

The colonel stammered a little.

"But Faith," he said, "but Faith——"

"Faith, Surrender, the Changed Heart, the New Name, the Indwelling Spirit—I can repeat them all to you with their appropriate exegesis and many notable examples."

The colonel was silent.

"And they're just phrases, Colonel Trent—just phrases made of words."

"Excuse me," said the colonel warmly, "but they're the revelation of God."

"And to me," said Mr. Thompson, "they're just an image that has tumbled down, and broken up into hearsay."

And the other person who seems to have suspected something more than salt-water may be represented very briefly by a picture post-card. For knowing nothing of the conversation between Mr. Thompson and the bishop, she despatched to the latter the following remark. For a minute or two his secretary puzzled over it in silence, and then laid it with other correspondence upon his lordship's desk. It was signed by a Miss Sarah Lennox, and on the face of it was not important.

"Your young man," she observed, "has been asking himself questions."

CHAPTER XIV

THIS was how Miss Sary put it, although Mr. Thompson himself would probably have failed to agree with her. For, while questions had been put to him, as he would readily have admitted, the Questioner, as has been seen, still remained obscure. It was something of this, indeed, that he had tried to express in his sermon, so unsatisfactory to the critical ear of Colonel Lincoln Trent, but of which the text, at any rate, had rung true to Miss Sary—revealing to her detectable spirit, within the simulacrum of the priest, the first, surprising stir of the explorer.

After the fashion of an explorer, too, it was only now, when he must leave it, that Mr. Thompson began to realise how dear this place had become to him—each landmark seeming to glow with an increasing friendliness. Even so, he thought, must the old voyagers have loved their first landing-places, when the fateful hour struck for the forests to engulf them. For the best-known country becomes un-mapped when approached on a new errand; and the very ordinary rest of England, lying black beyond Kilridge, seemed to rise before him now almost threateningly transmuted. It loomed grim behind the kindliness of Mr. Pratt's farewell; and it lent an infectious regret to his own.

It was this, perhaps, and indeed to us who know him so well it becomes difficult to suggest any more cogent reason, that induced the little man and his simple-hearted sister to suggest a prolongation of Mr. Thompson's visit. It was not often, they explained, that they were thus able to entertain a visitor so fresh from the advanced opinions of London. It appeared, however, that Father Lucy had already left for Switzerland; and that the economy of St. Ninian's demanded Mr. Thompson for to-morrow. He was sorry, but there was no alternative; so that at the end of the village it came to pass that they shook hands very cordially.

"Are you sure," said Mr. Pratt, "that you won't change your mind?" For Mr. Thompson had decided to walk as far as the station. So meetly, as it seemed to him, would he strike the greatest contrast to his arrival; and pay an apology that he felt due to this particular road. It would be so long, too, before the country would spread about him again.

"Well, if you must——" said Mr. Pratt.

"You'll find it very hot," said Miss Angela.

Mr. Pratt, still half an invalid, wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"The hottest day of the year," he said, "the hottest day of the year."

They both waved their hands to him, as did Dr. Lennox, pulling up for a moment, in his high dog-cart. He pointed his whip horizontally to the blurred horizon.

"Glass falling," he said; "I don't like the look of it."

And indeed, even to Mr. Thompson, totally ignorant of weather, there was a breathlessness in this hour that seemed to foreshadow its end. Its noon, even here on the cool hem of the sea, was too prodigal of its passion to admit of a successor. It was the summer's own noon, its full-tide, the utmost moment of its satiety. Ecstasy from its last chamber overran the earth overspread it like a film, quivering and hypnotic. It ran in waves about his feet and the straight fields of corn. It sank from them, gluttoned, into the hot pores of the ground. It was the slumber-time before harvest; and he saw no workers in the fields. But for the trembling of the air-veil against the channel and the hills, the whole world might have been chiselled out of a marble stillness. And it was only when he himself paused, standing softly in the dust, that he realised it to be the stillness of an incalculable energy.

It rose translated to his ear into a deep note like an organ's—like the drone at its topmost speed of some tremendous engine. It was hard to believe, as he stood there, that less than a month ago he had driven over it so preoccupied with himself and the impression that he was to make that he could merely condescend to call the country pretty. Pretty—and all the time, if he had but stooped an inch or two, it was reeling with this unstemmable fecundity.

He took off his hat, not to God, but to this thronged foundry of life. In that month since he had driven down here, lifetimes, like the sea-sand, had come to birth, known their zeniths, and died—to those that lived them, no doubt, as prolonged as

his own, just as his to some Greater might be as momentary. He was merely another article, tuned to a different rhythm, and mattering no more to the machine that made him than when, drowning, he had stared up into the stars. Only then, as a breaker of its laws, he had beheld it poised to crush him; whereas now, having learned his lesson, he stood unregarded, a spectator of its splendour. Birth and Passion and Death—that was the great engine's song; the gathering up of energy, the discharge, the exhaust. Civilisation over that primary theme was merely a tracery of accidentals. And why indeed should there be anything more than this untroubled turning of the wheels?

"I ought to have been a Greek," he said, and wondered why Greece had died—to be replaced, among other things, by the shrill squalor of Poplar.

He put on his hat, and strode forward along the road, that drew closer here to the hot side of the hills. And presently there broke out behind him, very far off, a low grumble of sound. It seemed to him, at first, to have come from the guns at Duckmouth. But in a minute or two, when he heard it again, he knew it to be thunder. He was close now to that spur of the Durling Hills, beneath which the road circles into Banner; and before rounding it, he stopped for a moment, looking back upon the way that he had come. The horizon, in spite of the storm, was as yet quite clear; or at the most a very little obscurer—with the sinuous outline of the coast still melting into it, the arid downs, and their bleached patchwork of crops. And yet, even as he stood there, shading

his eyes with his hand, the whole landscape seemed slowly to change; to lose its reality; to become, under this fervent heat, no more than a trembling incandescence. Across its colours, blending one with the other, the valley of Kilridge, that had stood for so much to him, lay shrunk to a thin fold of vapour—the faint wrinkle upon the face of a dream. A minute ago, and it had been his chief grip upon life, so vivid had been his existence there. And lo, it was already a mirage, with the slow clouds mounting above it; even as Change had mounted over Greece, and as London would envelop himself.

And it was then, as his eyes drank their last of it, that a horseman came riding down its brink. He took the bridle-path from the crest of the hills, swinging easily, like a wave's top, and with an air of nonchalant possession. Unconscious of this grim machine, he might have stood, almost, for its lordliest product; and it was only when he leapt comfortably into the road that Mr. Thompson recognised who it was. He stood aside, making it clear that he would like to thank him for past kindness. But Dick Bolton merely lifted his hand in a brief and unsmiling acknowledgment. If that was the last of Mr. Thompson, he reflected, it was a damned good job, and he was glad of it. He had seldom so instinctively disliked a man before.

Mr. Thompson watched him cantering into that dreamland; and, with his fledgling candour, admitted several facts.

"He is better looking," he said. "He is better bred. He thinks me vulgar. And he despises my eloquence."

He studied him gravely without further comment; and then, taking the bend of the road, turned finally towards town. So much past goes to the making of so small a present that he must not be surprised, he thought, to be taking back with him so little—eight guineas, that was all—eight guineas and some experience.

To which, for ourselves, we ought, perhaps, to add an echo or two—of a girl's voice, for instance, at once reverent and amused, and her strong arms cleaving the water.

CHAPTER XV

BEHIND a narrative, however, that must needs swing back again to cities, it becomes pleasant to loiter at a half-way house—to dip, for a moment, upon this torrid afternoon, into a small but shadowy Eastbourne shop. It was kept by a Mrs. Bartlett, whose fleeting incidence in these pages seems to have been determined at any rate partially, by the Spirit of Place—no more prominent reason suggesting itself why this lady should have pored, every Wednesday afternoon, over the *South Dorsetshire Times*.

Not for forty years (and she was now but forty-six) had she resided in South Dorsetshire, or nearer to it than here; and not more than twice in that period had she paid it a visit. And yet here in a town that continued to be foreign to her she hugged home to her bosom in the *South Dorsetshire Times*. It was her gospel of a kingdom far more real to her than her shop, and populated with beings of much livelier interest. Children that she had never seen, unborn when she emigrated, had come to birth in it, and been married, and brought forth children of their own. And from their doings as related spasmodically in this newspaper she had

built up their histories with an extraordinary detail.

So have you seen, Spirit-possessed, Peckham bending itself solemnly over the local tidings in a *Kelso Independent*; or Union Street Boro', with a finger-nail in mourning, tracing out for itself the discoveries of a *Tipperary Observer*. Effect a transposition, and some of the pathos in this vanishes, or betakes itself, at any rate, to a different plane. Put Mrs. Bartlett back in Dorset, and she would presently glow for Eastbourne, mentally devouring the speeches of its leading citizens, and marking from afar the wax and wane of its enterprise; so that you could scarcely have called her unhappy, if she was not wholly contented. It seems probable, indeed, that she was all of us in our less busy moments; and she may even now be lining Heaven with reminiscences of earth.

On this particular afternoon, however, she was merely lining a box of rattling chalks with a last week's issue of her paper. It was the pure carelessness of the manufacturers, she explained, that made this *manœuvre* necessary; and when their traveller came round again she would point this out to him with emphasis. Chalks of all things should be packed so that fracture became impossible, when carried in the reticules of young, artistic ladies—such as the one who now smiled at having discovered a "character," and passed out into the sunlight to rejoin her companion.

Now to emerge suddenly from shadow into its very brilliant reverse is to perceive the rest of the

world with a peculiar trenchancy of vision—of which recent schools of painting have illustrated for us, with thoroughness, not only the advantages but the extreme accompanying perils. On that solitary flash, therefore, Lily Delmarsh would have hesitated to decide anything more about Berenice than that, leaning against a lamp-post in what she believed to be smart clothes, she was not posing under circumstances that lent her much glamour. To her, at any rate, even upon consideration, nobody could have applied the term artistic; and to most persons, at first sight, its opposite would have occurred. One passing lady, indeed, with the pungent intuition of a headache, did define her *sotto voce* not altogether, perhaps, inaccurately.

“Beef and ignorance,” she said, and thought them a queer couple—the cultured figure with the chinks, and this straddling young Amazon. And if this was an opinion to which we need attach no great importance, it must be noted that it became visible to Lily’s rather sensitive eye. For there was no doubt about it. Berenice was a little incongruous. And it had been astonishingly rash of Lily, after three years’ absence, to have asked her upon a visit that was to last for a month.

It had been doubly rash, indeed, since at Berenice’s time of life those years held all the difference between the adult and the adolescent. They had lifted her, rather disturbingly, to the level of a contemporary. She was no longer the younger school-girl, from a somewhat piquant home, upon whom one could build up an uncon-

ventional reputation. She had ceased to be merely the pagan, from whose exhibition at Lady Margaret's a certain *éclat* had been gained in a rather earnest set. And since Wimbledon had been forsaken, upon her father's death, for a cosmopolitan life with a nervous mother, she had lost much of her social value as the daughter of a baronet.

And yet with all this, as Lily Delmarsh had been obliged to confess, it was really her own development for which she had failed to make allowances. For while Berenice, no doubt, had grown up a little in the interval, her limitations appeared to be much as they had always been—an impregnable ignorance of matters literary and artistic; an indifference to even Bohemian fashion; and an almost annoying monotony of health. And it was her own deepened nature that she had not sufficiently realised—the inevitable enlargement of mind that had resulted from her travels; the sensibility brought to birth by the invalid's demands; and the more exacting standard of judgment unconsciously created by them both.

Thus to champion a Miss Chote, whose father had monopolised the newspapers, had been pleasantly worth doing both at school and college—from her own character's point of view and in the presumed interests of the girl. Whereas to walk about Eastbourne, as a woman of the world, with a very insular companion who had never heard of Whistler (to say nothing of Previati or Matisse) had almost instantly promised to be quite a different affair. It was only fortunate that

Berenice would be unlikely to perceive this. And Miss Delmarsh had selected her attitude with commendable rapidity. Thus Berenice was to become for her the theatre, gently rallied, wherein a somewhat jaded observer might study the primal emotions. In this way, as far as was possible, would the old relations be preserved.

"You dear, big thing," she had exclaimed, when the awkward gulf had first threatened, "how I envy you your *freshness* and your splendid muscles"—slightly, it must be admitted, to Berenice's perplexity, and a little (but only a little) to her positive discomfort.

For while the analysis of a changed position was keener, no doubt, on Lily Delmarsh's side, certain aspects of it had not escaped the slower perception of Berenice. Into the homage with which she had always regarded this friend of her brief school-days—shortened, for the school's sake, by her too conspicuous surname—she had been surprised to find creeping a new leaven of criticism. It was rotten. But there it was, forcing her to notice silly details—how European travel, for example, had rather exaggerated Lily's pout, and her advancing standard of æsthetics set tiny outposts round her eyes. They were pretty eyes still. But they had found judgment a little tiring. Their *savoir faire*, they suggested, had been rather expensively purchased.

Moreover, there had now, for the first time, been pencilled out a little acre of experience where Lily's sceptre might be tested; and where it seemed to Berenice that her easy superiority might (if it had

been worth bothering about) reasonably be challenged. For it was a region of biology wherein, as she thought, she walked in at least an equal daylight; and where further, she suspected, there was this difference between them—that Lily's lips, for all their wisdom, had not yet been forced to consider a kiss.

With such small reservations, then, very languidly examined, you are to behold these young ladies reclining amicably upon the shore, Lily in a deck-chair with her neat shoes crossed, and Berenice sprawling, too well-dressed (as she supposed), for the heart of comfort, but in comparative ease upon the beach beside her. They were neither of them quite asleep, Lily toying with *Les Désenchantées*, and Berenice staring alternately at the water's edge and the sky; and since it is only the quite healthy that can enjoy complete immobility, their bodily well-being may be surmised from their attitudes. Reproduced, too, more or less, and at discreet distances from one another, similar groups dotted the shore, dozing out the afternoon—undisturbed by the thunder beyond a brazen sky, and possibly mesmerised by the whisper of a very methodical wave.

That is scarcely the right word, perhaps, since it was wetter than a whisper. Let us call it the susurrus of this patient wave. For it must surely have been the same wave. Its evolutions were so identical—a slow heaping-up of the olive-green water into a long, unbroken, two-foot ridge; its leisurely, almost reluctant approach; the then comparative impetuosity of its upper layers,

whereby the lower were out-hastened and overhung; and finally, all along the line, a polite process of fracture into innumerable glittering spicules—that slid over and dissolved presently into sluggish films of cream.

So orderly was it and unhurried that the whole process might have been happening, at these regular intervals, since the world began. And thus, indeed, it had seemed, a good many years ago, to a very inferior actress who had married above her. There must have been something tragic in it, too, for she had stared at it with tears, raw from a husbandly recital of her social disadvantages. But the little boy who was with her had dabbled his toes in the cream, where presently hers had joined them, till they were both laughing together. And now, in their wake, twenty-five years later, came a party of school-girls, advancing in *echelon* behind our young ladies, passing them on either flank, and taking the water without delay.

They must have done it before, because their legs were an ivory brown; and it seems a little gross, perhaps, to make use of them, even thus surreptitiously, for so erudite a purpose as a psychological test. Let it be said, then, as briefly as honesty will permit, that our young ladies reacted to them in the following way—Lily Delmarsh by seizing her sketch-book and some chalks, and Berenice by realising, ruefully conscious of her stockings, just how ripping those legs must be feeling. It appeared, however, that at Eastbourne, and so nearly in front of the hotel, at this hour of the afternoon, and in one's present frock,

the completer liberty represented by these more fortunate little girls was not for the likes of Berenice Chote.

"Why," said Lily Delmarsh sharply—and indeed a little uncertainly, "how—how funny. You never told me."

"Told you what, my dear?" inquired Berenice lazily.

"That you'd been pulling a young man out of the English Channel."

Berenice rolled over her right elbow, observed the *South Dorsetshire Times*, and relapsed again upon the pebbles.

"Eh?" she said. "Oh—how did you get hold of that rag?"

Lily spread the maligned fragment into a greater smoothness, and read the paragraph again, in which Mr. Thompson's rescue had been described by an imaginative reporter on a foundation of fact.

"Is it true?" she inquired, still the least bit querulous. "How exciting! Was he nice? And why didn't you tell me before?"

"Oh, it's true enough," said Berenice. "There was nothin' in it, you know. He'd got tired, that was all, and I helped him home again."

Lily folded up the paper, and put it carefully in her pocket.

"I must keep this for the mater," she said. "I suppose if that old woman hadn't happened to stuff it in, we should never have heard anything at all about it."

Berenice grunted a little, staring tranquilly at the sky. It was much too hot to be angry. But

she could not see that she had been in the wrong. Lily was not the historian deputed to chronicle her life. Then she relented almost immediately, and amplified the story.

"An' of course, old girl, I'd have told you if I'd happened to think of it "

"Was he nice?" repeated Lily, remembering that this question had escaped answer.

"We—ell," said Berenice, still gazing at the sky. And that was as far, for the moment, as she felt able to proceed. *Was* Mr. Thompson nice? She had really never considered him from that particular point of view; while, as for Lily, she felt as if she had been giving herself rather horribly away—as if Berenice might just possibly have had a whole army of experiences, unknown to herself, tucked away up her sleeve. And in view of her own rôle, as it now reappeared to her, this was not a supposition that was particularly pleasant.

It was quite useless, however, to bewail this; and indeed, for all that Berenice knew, she herself might have undergone just such a pregnant ordeal. She donned, therefore, very carefully, the whole armour of humility.

"Oh B, dear," she said, "you don't mean you're—you're in *love*?"

That Berenice could blush we have had visible evidence. But now her cheek remained as cool as a wet pebble. She addressed herself to the heavens with a grin of genuine amusement.

"Good lord, no," she said, "not with Mr. Thompson."

It was not quite happily phrased, as she perceived

the next moment; and it offered a fence to Lily Delmarsh that she decided to take.

"Well—with anybody?" she inquired.

Berenice stared at the paddlers. Lily could not be sure if she had heard the question.

"Of course," she said presently, "I ought to have told you. He was a parson."

"Well, I know," said Lily, "the paper told me that."

Berenice considered for a moment.

"An' of course parsons are different," she added.

"How do you mean, different?" said Lily indulgently. "They're very ordinary people, aren't they?—and most of them rather dull. Besides, I shouldn't have thought that you knew any."

But beyond the paddlers and the wave Berenice was staring into a chancel, wherein a stained-glass Christ hung stretched upon a cross, while his human representative uttered words of solemnity—"Who hath given Power and Commandment to His Ministers." . . .

Then, being founded on water, it melted back into the sea, whence a naked young man cried out to her for help. It had not occurred to her before that the latter vision in any way cancelled the former. But perhaps it did. And on the whole, if she could be sure of this, it would be a rather comforting fact. It would reduce an experience that still haunted her to the realm of art and drama; and the most prominent figure in it to a merely skilled performer. Perhaps that was how, in future, she ought to regard him. It was in that way, no doubt, that her own people did regard

him; only they had never, not caring for drama, beheld his part in it.

The thought opened out, too, a new way of solving a difficult problem. Perhaps the Church, after all, was merely a dramatic system, not appealing for that reason to plain people like the Chotes, or on the other hand to connoisseurs like Lily Delmarsh—whose taste in Art did not extend to miracle-plays. And if this did not quite account for all that it had seemed to hint to herself, it at any rate explained much of its obvious unreality.

Lily stared at her curiously, wondering what she was thinking about.

"You've not got converted, I suppose?" she asked half-seriously. For Berenice was exactly the crude sort of person to whom, she believed, this phenomenon occurred. But Berenice only laughed again.

"Good lord, no," she said; and then remembered that it was Dick who had put to her this same question.

It would be misleading to suggest that he only now claimed her attention. But she wondered suddenly if he would like Lily Delmarsh. She did not think so, though he was brainy. Because his braininess was of a different kind. It was not of the kind, she thought, that fell in love with brains. She rather liked him for that, as well as for his physical excellence—on horseback, and to hounds, and with his bat and gun.

"You strange person," mused Lily, "but you never told me if you were in love—or whether the little parson fell in love with you."

"I saw no signs of it," said Berenice, "at least, I don't think so. And I'm getting beastly hungry. Isn't it time for tea?"

But if Lily's double-barrelled questions gained her no satisfying knowledge, at least they made Berenice look to her armour—become aware, indeed, perhaps for the first time, of the rather mortifying need for armour at all. Fortunately, during tea-time, there prevailed a period of truce, chiefly owing to the desire of the florid lady who was Lily's mother to describe the phases of her after-luncheon indigestion. And in the evening, prematurely dark, and between the thunder showers, Berenice slipped out alone in her rain-coat and tam-o'-shanter. With her inherited traditions and placid habit of mind, public opinion of herself had never greatly troubled her. But it was only thus, and at this time of day, that she could shed as completely as she desired the fashionable hotel-guest that she had perforce become.

Swinging her stick, and untrammelled, she took the suburban-looking road that wound upwards from the town to the cropped flank of Beachy Head. Hovering over her, too, but unnoticed except by ourselves, hung that Spirit which has been seen to preside over this chapter—not far from her, but veiled at present by more urgent considerations. For she also was beginning to be sorry that she had committed herself for a month; and at a moment when for Lily she had apparently just sprung into interest. And yet it was not Lily that was wholly to blame. She was the mouthpiece, that was all, of something bigger than herself. For they were

all, she felt vaguely, but converging columns of attack, pressing home upon that first bewildering movement in Kilridge church. Dick's kiss, Lily's question, that sonorous liturgy—they had entrenched themselves upon a geography that they had permanently changed; even as the camp-lights of civilisation now lay ringed about Beachy Head. And between them, and never asking for her consent, they had forced her into the ranks of the desired.

From this warfare, let it be said at once, Mr. Thompson remained largely aloof, since neither he nor that for which he stood seemed the immediately pressing factors. But Dick's kiss and Lily Delmarsh's challenge were incidents of a more concrete world. They had thrust Choice into her hands as between people that could touch her and hold her fast. And though she might still walk free as Artemis (whom she associated vaguely with this quality), she could never again go quite unguarded—which was always, apparently, the stern price of promotion.

So her thoughts came and went, even as the uncertain wind veered, now lifting her up the hill, and now blowing in her face. The night was blotted with great clouds, between which the stars shone clustered, and the air ~~was~~ heavy with ozone, but less oppressive as she climbed higher. So also, standing at the top, she looked down upon Eastbourne, longing for her wilder downs, yet not unfascinated by those lights; and from her meditations, as she paused there, this at least emerged distinctly—that, as regarded Lily Del-

marsh, Dick Bolton must remain a secret. Then she laughed to herself, half in apology, for making all this pother about nothing; and the wind, as though agreeing with her, swung abruptly to its direction. It cracked her skirts out behind her, with a sharp note like a whip's—or as if suddenly, from between her reluctant fingers, it had shut away the last leaf of a book.

CHAPTER XVI

I

Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner ; and even in time, perhaps, to find lovable. And though it can hardly be said that either Vavas seur or Rowley had progressed, with regard to Mr. Thompson, quite so far as this, they had at least learned their subject to the verge of tolerance—and this in spite of the systematic ravishing, by their more gifted colleague, of most of the traditions that constituted their real creed. Thus for themselves, as they at any rate decently assumed to remember, they were quite ordinary young men, Vavas seur older, and Rowley a year or two younger than 'our Mr. Thompson,' as they generally called him.

Moreover, they both possessed in a very marked degree the dexterous faculty of separating themselves, when off duty, very nearly completely from their adopted profession—of never allowing it certainly, in Vavas seur's phrase, to slop over, as Mr. Thompson did, into an inappropriate realm.

That they had long ago ceased actively to dislike him for this, must be set down at once to their inherent good-nature and to a tacit recognition of his somewhat different antecedents. He had

not been exposed, for instance, as they themselves had, both at school and college, to the uncompromising criticism of gentlemanly contemporaries. He had never been forced, therefore, to learn, and his sense of humour had not supplied the deficiency, that modern sacerdotalism was only possible upon the assumption that its authority derives solely from its office; and is not innate in the youth, merely separated by yesterday from Robinson on the Stock Exchange or Jones in the Lancers, who happens to fill it for the public good.

Even from this standpoint, of course, they were bound, rather reluctantly, to admit the existence of a certain mystery. But it was at least an impersonal one, consistent with modesty and good sense; and to neither of them had it occurred that they would ever find any difficulty in thus happily preserving these two separate identities. That they could ultimately drift, on the one hand, into the ineffectual mysticism of Father Matthews, or exude unction, upon the other, at all seasons, as did Father Carthew, were grotesque possibilities that they had very rightly not considered. In Father Lucy they had perceived the fruition of their own method in a triumphant combination that they sincerely admired. And they were quite content to accept him as a model for themselves.

Unconscious, then, of the somewhat cataclysmal experiences that it has been our duty to record in the last few chapters, they are to be seen lounging for a moment in the hot twilight of Vavasseur's sitting-room—a small room on the third floor of

what was called the Clergy House, but which in reality was a rearward extension of the main building or Pull-up. Below it, if one leaned from the window-sill, could be seen a pavement passage, leading right and left respectively to the East India Dock Road and a small quadrangle of cottages. And this was bounded upon the other side by the blank wall of a warehouse, with his back to which lolled Vavas seur in one of three arm-chairs. No current of air stirred through the window, and beyond it, as into the fluid murmur of a forest, the voices of London had merged into one, threaded, as by bird-calls, by the louder notes of the children, and so omnipresent as to have ceased to become noticeable. A strong odour of fish crept up the side of the passage, pushing itself sluggishly from the opposite wall, and trickling in over the dusty window-sill.

Throwing his tobacco-pouch on the table, Vavas seur felt for a match, and glanced humorously at his companion. It was a quarter to seven, and there was half an hour before dinner, which was to be followed at eight by the weekly concert at the Pull-up. The afternoon had been spent in sick visitation, and by Rowley, in addition, practising water-polo with the choir-boys. He, like Vavas seur, was in a cassock, and still wore his biretta, the latter pushed back a little over his wet, well-parted hair. He was smoking a cigarette, and taking a short cut through the church, had observed Mr. Thompson before the picture in the Lady Chapel—not kneeling, as he explained, but in an impressive attitude.

"Audience, I suppose?" smiled Vavas seur, lighting his pipe.

"Mother Humphries," grunted Rowley, "the two Rendle girls and some Belgravians."

Vavas seur sucked the first mouthfuls of tobacco smoke in a luxurious silence, the amusement only deepening a little in his handsome eyes. For, in contradistinction to Rowley, who kept himself aggressively masculine, he enjoyed, and indeed attracted the society of women—but fastidiously and in no rivalry to the more expansive methods of Mr. Thompson. Thus to the majority of Mr. Thompson's particular clientèle, he rather shrewdly suspected himself of appearing haughty; while to the others he was probably not sufficiently spiritual. It did not disturb his serenity, since, even had he possessed them, he would have deprecated a popularity based on curls and eloquence. And, as has been seen, he was genially willing to let Mr. Thompson expound to him his views upon his admirers, and their appropriate classification. He made a movement with his pipe towards the window behind him.

"Well," he said, "one must have some consolation, I suppose, for returning to this."

Rowley was silent. If one kept fit, he thought, such consolation should not be necessary. For himself it was quite sufficient to deal with women as a priest. As a man he preferred to woo boxing-gloves and foils. He threw his cigarette into the fireplace, and frowned at the warehouse wall.

"You seem disposed to grudge it him," said Vavas seur with a smile.

"Me?" said Rowley. "Great Scott, no. Only I shouldn't have thought that he wanted any."

"How do you mean?"

"Too much of a townie. I expect he's purring to be back again."

Vavas seur closed his eyes.

"I fancy you're about right," he said. "What with Carthew in charge, and friend Thompson full of oxygen, there ought to be quite a lot of purring here during the next six weeks."

"It's my belief," said Rowley solemnly, "that by the time he's the same age, our Mr. Thompson will be the very image of Daddy Carthew."

"Profound feller you are!" said Vavas seur with admiration. "Only Carthew's overdone it, as our Albert knows. And our Albert's got wit enough to know when to stop."

Rowley lit another cigarette, and changed the topic.

"By gad, Vav," he said, "that young Henderson can swim."

And it was then that Mr. Thompson came into the room.

He came in with a firm step, as if he had something rather important to tell them; but stopped short almost immediately with a sudden change of expression. They waved him a friendly welcome, the quizzical look, to which hitherto he had always been impervious, still lingering as an afterglow of their conversation. They noticed that he was very brown, and his face, perhaps, a little thinner—it could stand that—and that his boots were dusty, as though he had walked from Waterloo.

Vavas seur lifted his foot, and pushed the third arm-chair towards him.

"Well, you're looking very fit," he said. "Had a good time down there?"

But Mr. Thompson was still staring at them with that curious air of apology, as though by accident he had blundered into an unexpected company. Then he glanced at the empty chair, but did not seem to perceive it, and saw instead, that they were talking, not to himself at all, but to the part that he had been playing just a month ago. He saw how natural this was; and that whatever he said to them now would be indulgently accepted as belonging to some new pose. He marvelled, indeed, at this toleration from what he knew now were complete strangers—as strange to him as the costers that he had passed in the New Cut, or that pale river of faces flowing by him over London Bridge.

"Oh, yes," he said, "yes, thank you. I've had a very good time."

It seemed so useless to try and say anything else.

Then Rowley got up, and stretched himself, and said that he must write a letter before dinner; but Vavas seur, smoking placidly, still pressed Mr. Thompson to sit down.

"No," said Mr. Thompson, "no, thank you; I mustn't stay."

He walked over to the window, and looked down into the passage.

"Same old row," suggested Vavas seur, "and perhaps a little more than the same old stink."

Upon a shelf to the right of the window, the title

of a book caught Mr. Thompson's eye. It was *The Jesus of Q*, by an author whom he did not know.

"I wonder," he said, "if you would mind letting me have a look at this."

Vavas seur tilted back his chair, and glanced round to see the volume.

"Not a bit," he said. "Take it by all means. Keep it as long as you like."

Mr. Thompson turned some of its pages, and once or twice opened his mouth, as though about to explain why he wanted to borrow it. But there was still something in Vavas seur's attitude that made this seem futile.

He paused for a moment in the doorway.

"I'll take great care of it," he said; and when he had gone, Vavas seur smiled, blowing a careful smoke-ring after him.

"What's he hatching out now?" he wondered lazily, and being healthily tired, closed his eyes.

II

But while, with his new eyes, Mr. Thompson had seen quite clearly that they were strangers, these colleagues of his had, at any rate, revealed to him, as nothing else had yet done, the full measure of the task that lay before him. And it seemed to him that they had done more; that they had explained to him a little—if they had not dissipated—this strange atmosphere that had imprisoned him ever since he left Banner. Very delicately, but with an almost cynical completeness, it had

been dropped upon him, as it were, at the precise moment of his departure; as though henceforward he must travel not in life at all, but through a crowded solitude of images, whose realities he might never touch.

They came trooping before him again, as he sat in his own room, those lay figures across their shifting backgrounds—the people that had been in the carriage with him, the little clerk and his family; the commercial traveller; the pink-jowled publican behind his newspaper. Even from the beginning—perhaps, indeed, more understandably at the beginning—they had all moved for him as on strings; while their conversation—of the heat, sea-bathing, votes for women, had seemed as unrelated to the immediate and pressing issues of existence as the patter of a showman's doll to the traffic in the street. Only it had not been comic. Within its own quite irrelevant little orbit it had been conducted with an almost pathetic absorption; as though, with a volcano shuddering beneath them, they had determined to be correct about their ribbons.

It had been an odd sensation, and presumably transient, but as the train had neared London these first characters in the drama had only multiplied themselves to the exigencies of a more complicated spectacle. Into the innumerable multitude of their fellows they had merely melted to be reproduced, in new garments and about other tasks, and backed by an ever-increasing stridor, but still flat with the moving flatness of mechanical representations. Thus the old woman at the street-

corner, and the beer-house that she worshipped; the little girls with their tight plaits and ears cocked for blasphemy; the hoarse navvy that supplied it; the slabs of liver on the meat-stalls; the picture post-cards in the windows; all these, and the implications for which they had stood, the tides that had tossed them into notice—he had seen them, as he had never seen anything else before, with an amazing clarity of vision. And yet all the time they had been false, with the exact falsity of a cinematograph; whose flicker upon his cell's wall he could neither let nor hinder, and that held him faster at each step in a horrible travesty of life. . . .

He opened the door, and crossed the landing, looking down upon the ~~l~~ading-room. He could hear the footsteps of the porter moving heavily upon its concrete floor, and how his voice boomed, mingling with its echoes. Both sounds were quite familiar, but from that shadowy well, now pricked with lights, they came up to him, as from a stage, hollow and histrionic. He went back again into his room, closing the door behind him, and saw his prie-dieu with its two candles, and the ebony crucifix above it. He saw his picture upon the wall, a popular moon-rise over the sea; and he knew now that it contained nothing of either the one or the other. He opened the window. But even so the whole air of the place stifled him. It was like a theatre before breakfast. It was like a green-room of the spirit.

Then the gong struck for dinner, and he washed his hands and face, reaching out for his cassock, but drawing back again before he touched it.

"No, I'm damned if I will," he said, and went downstairs as he was.

III

Father Carthew held out a plump hand.

"You're looking well, Mr. Thompson," he said, and introduced him to the guest of the evening—a well-known North London priest, who was afterwards to give a reading from Dickens. Being in the middle of a story, this gentleman's greeting was brief, a rapid inspection through two prominent brown eyes, forgetful that they had ever seen Mr. Thompson before, and a pleasant nod as he took his place at the table. He was an authority, as Mr. Thompson was aware, not only upon Dickens, but upon Thackeray, and apart from this enjoyed a lively reputation as a restless, rather quick-tempered cleric, with strong views on what he called sanity in ritual. His story, which had been apparently amusing, referred, it seemed, to a recent sojourn in the Midlands; and since it was contrary to the St. Ninian's custom for a benediction to be pronounced aloud, no further hindrance was encountered to its commanding flow. It had reached the point where the narrator had been obliged to assist at a ceremony defined by him, with enormous solemnity, as the 'Elevation of the Alms Dish'—a rite to which his host had seemed to attach an almost supernatural importance.

Very minutely, and to a constant accompaniment of laughter, he described the stages by which the money-bags (elaborately worked, he said, by the lady tapestry-weavers of the district) had found

their way to the sacred vehicle; which had then been presented, with slow music, though happily without *oscula*, to the vicar—who, thereupon turning magnificently eastward, had borne it before him with uplifted eyes.

“Anglican ritual at its top mark,” he laughed, “but, good lord, how tragic”—he struck the table with his fist—“how tragic to think of those poor souls coddling themselves up with little qualms about their lawlessness, their advancement, their splendid symbolism, when all it amounts to is that sort of stuff, the Incessional, the *Recessional*, the *Ascription*—and never even a hint of the Real Thing”—Mr. Thompson instinctively lifted his eyes—“the Ely Confession—but no singing of the gospel; red baize and cotton-wool at Christmas—but not a yard of violet in Lent; pumpkins for the predella at Harvest—but no chrism for the babes at baptism.”

There was a moment's pause.

“Beef or mutton, sir?” whispered the servant.
“Or would you rather have a slice of cold chicken?”

IV

Down the corridors outside, and at the entrance of the concert-room, other figures began to gather themselves about him, some with nods and smiles, some with a welcome more demonstrative and set to words. Thus three members of the choir, with shiny, naturally insolent faces, shook hands with him effusively—conscious, in the presence of spectators, of their special intimacy with the

clergy. Two humbler and more elderly men, regular attendants not only at these concerts, but at nearly every service in the church, followed their example, hoping that Mr. Thompson was in health, and conveying, without prejudice, their personal sense of relief at his return. They peeped round, whispering huskily behind their hands.

"For Father Rowley, he's a rare 'un with the boys, but he ain't no great shakes, as the sayin' is, when it comes to preachink—nor Father Vavas seur neither."

Mr. Thompson looked down into their eyes, set like puddles in an impenetrable pavement.

"And by now," he said, "you must be quite connoisseurs."

They passed in grinning to secure their places near the platform; and at the same moment Mr. Thompson felt his hand uplifted in a feminine gloved one that seemed impatient.

"Well, Father, aren't you *ever* going to notice me?"

He found himself confronted by a middle-aged young lady, with an alert, rather petulant expression. He begged her pardon, shook her hand, and let it go.

"And have you settled the great question?" she inquired.

He stared at her for a moment in silence.

"No," he said, "I'm afraid I haven't."

She frowned a little, shaking her head at him.

"You wicked man," she said, "I believe you've forgotten all about it."

A younger lady joined them, shaking hands more phlegmatically.

"Do you hear that, Ella?" said the first.
"Father Thompson has forgotten all about it."

She turned to him again, punctuating each syllable with a little blow of her programme upon his sleeve.

"Oh—you—bad—man," she said. "Don't you remember that you promised to advise us about our Retreat—the Kensington branch of the White Sisters' Guild?"

But the speaker, being fortunately a pianist, was now borne away gingerly by Rowley; and in her wake clattered a small troop of working lads, pulling off their caps as they entered. In most of them, extorted by an early independence, the men that they would become had already emerged upon their faces shy, subtle, or determined, and already, he thought, questioning their environment. About half of them, following an elder's lead, looked up at him with oblique glances of recognition. And he remembered that, aeons ago, in the last act but one, or before that, he had prepared these young beings for Confirmation; had guaranteed, as it were, that in laying his hands upon them the energetic bishop would be making no mistake; had labelled them, with proper solemnity, as fit persons for the Church of Christ.

He watched them, as they began to melt into the audience, thickly serried now, and of a curious pallor. And so remote were they, was even the nearest of them, that this memory came to him quite purged of sacrilege—of everything, indeed, but an extraordinary futility.

"And yet I must be seeing it all wrong," he said, "I must surely be seeing it all wrong."

Then his eye, wandering, found one or two waifs, standing about strangely at the end of the hall; and he longed to speak with them, comparing experiences. "How are *you* seeing all this?" he wanted to say, though he knew in advance that they would never tell him the truth.

And then, as he stood back a little into the cooler corridor, a small figure, cowed and bent, blundered against him, and recovered itself to apologise. He turned quickly, taking a deep breath, suddenly free. He held out both his hands.

"Let me come with you," he said.

CHAPTER XVII

I

UPON the kerbstone of the most actual street that Mr. Thompson had ever seen, Father Matthews paused for a moment. There would have been time to cross it before either the electric tram or the slower lorry that it would overtake could possibly have endangered their transit. But Father Matthews had grown a little nervous. He laid a thin hand on Mr. Thompson's arm.

"You don't remember Bella Janey?" he said.

"Eh?" said Mr. Thompson. "No. I'm afraid I don't."

At that moment, indeed, Bella Janey seemed supremely unimportant. But then how could Father Matthews divine what the moment held?

He proceeded, instead, to explain himself with the deliberation of the feeble old—who, having at most such a little time to spare, seem so curiously prodigal of its passage.

"She was one of our maids, you know—in the kitchen, I think—yes, we can cross now—six years ago. That was just before you came to us. Poor Bella Janey."

They had come safely now to the opposite side of the road, the old Father, tipping forward a little, paddling along with quick, short steps. To their

left, borrowing dignity from the great reach of sky behind it, rose the Georgian body and cupola of St. Anne's, Limehouse. The air, still unthrilled by the storms of further south, stood close and charged with the evening odours of the city. Persons brisk and languid, but all marvellously living, met them, and passed by, and sometimes touched their clothes. Presently the old man began to speak again in his impassive, rather sing-song voice.

"She's going through her bad times," he said, "her bad times, poor girl."

"Does everybody have bad times?" asked Mr. Thompson. "And do they always come through them?"

Both questions seemed the natural fruit of the old man's intonation. He felt a hand slipped under his arm.

"You have long legs," said Father Matthews. "Now tell me about your holiday."

But the words, the torrents of them, fell suddenly back from Mr. Thompson's lips.

"No," he said, "tell me first about Bella Janey."

"She had to leave us," said Father Matthews. "She was going to have a child. He wouldn't marry her at first. He said the fault was not his. I don't know. He married her afterwards—after the first child was born. He was a sailor. He's still a sailor. Poor fellow. That's why she's written to me. He's just been taken to the hospital. He had a fall into the hold. I had a message from her just now. She thinks the surgeons are to operate upon him."

They turned to the left between a timber-yard and the dark waters of a dock.

"So it's her bad time, poor girl. She's in bed still, with her second baby about two months old. She's had phthisis for some time. And this confinement has made it worse, I'm afraid. Now tell me about Kilridge, and my friend whom you met there."

"Your friend? Oh, I'd forgotten."

"I had a line from him last week."

Mr. Thompson was silent for a moment.

"I don't think it's Kilridge that was troubling me," he said, "so much as the London that I had come back to."

"Well, about London then," said Father Matthews—but as if there were very little difference; as if both were parts of the river-bed through which the same stream flowed. And indeed, even before Mr. Thompson began, his late imprisonment had slipped into history; had become as ghostly almost as that world with which it had seemed to surround him. Only it was odd that by just being something Father Matthews could have done all this.

It must by this time have been nearly nine o'clock, but the sunset light had not quite faded from the sky. It made a rim for the timber-stack piled up on their right; and on their left, where below them lay a schooner in the dock, it still lingered like gold-dust in the deepening twilight. It was lighting too, beyond this, four motionless derricks upon a pier; and for a moment, as he stopped speaking, it was these that held Mr. Thompson's gaze. There was some quality that

they seemed to share with this old priest beside him. They had both seen, perhaps, so many burdens brought painfully into dock.

"And so already, you see," he concluded, "it seems hardly worth telling about. But do you think that I *was* seeing it all wrong?"

"London?"

"St. Ninian's—the whole system—the whole machinery."

Father Matthews hesitated for a minute.

"I'm afraid," he said at last, "it's rather a long time since I thought about the machinery. I was never much of an engineer, you know. And I've just used what was at hand."

"You don't think that it's very important—the machine, I mean?"

"Oh, I do—as important as machinery ever is; and as dangerous, I suppose."

The street bent round at a right angle, leading them parallel with the river, but separated from it by warehouses now left to the caretakers. An old woman and a child, and a corpulent man in a fez looked up at them incuriously from adjacent doorsteps. Along the railway-line beyond the timber-yard a train ran whistling towards the city; and under the fence, across the road, and dancing a sort of cake-walk, a young man and a girl came shouting down the pavement.

"No," he said, "I'm afraid that I can't help you there. You must trust your own eyes. Mine are getting too old." He smiled a little. "It's the young eyes, you know, that have to see when the wheels are becoming clogged, or the by-products

too many. If the machine's got to be scrapped, it's the new men that must do it."

Mr. Thompson looked at him curiously.

"That doesn't pain you," he said, "to think of scrapping the machine?"

"No. Why should it?" said Father Matthews.

"It's not the machine that matters."

The asphalt roadway beneath them transmuted itself to cobbles. Upon each side of them the houses drew in, like the houses of a harbour; and between them, above the fretted line of more distant roof-tops, an arc-light came into being, like a pale bubble in the sky.

"Where are we going?" asked Mr. Thompson; "where does Bella Janey live?"

Father Matthews told him the street, that lay still west of them in Wapping.

"That's a long way from our parish, isn't it?" said Mr. Thompson.

Father Matthews leant more heavily on his arm.

"But then friends don't live in parishes," he said, "in that particular sense——" and Mr. Thompson made a new, perhaps irrelevant discovery.

"Do you know," he said slowly, "I haven't got any friends."

II

For a moment or two, as they crossed the open space below Shadwell High Street, they fringed the crowd again in a dusky game of football, conducted with good temper, though not wholly without expletives, in the presence of a few lounging men

and girls. But, having passed this and the two bridges towards Wapping Wall, they came once more into a region comparatively still—a deep channel between warehouses into which the night had already flowed, but with the refuse of the day still strewn over the cobbles. It was so hushed here, indeed, that but for all this, the hanging chains against the sky, and the acrid odour of dung, they might almost have been passing through some giant mausoleum. The air, too, held in gaol by these towering walls, seemed unfriendly to life, something palpable to be pushed through. And it was only when they passed the crooked mouth of some by-street or the swing-doors of a public-house, that they could realise this to be the boundary of so thronged a population.

Pushing back the serge hood of his cloak, the old Father stopped for a moment to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"I'm glad," he said, "that we haven't got very much farther to go. Listen, it's like the ocean that you've just come back from——" but at once hoarser and more apathetic, and yet so immediate that a blown whistle or a scream would have flooded this darkness instantly. As they went on, too, seeking space from the crowded streets to the northward, jets of life seemed to have spurted into this quieter roadway—groups of pale-frocked little girls, flitting silently on bare feet, and men in shirt-sleeves, spitting heavily across the pavement. From occasional narrow houses, also, and the windows above taverns, elbows gleamed, and eyes looked down at them; and from a corner two

red-cheeked women shouted a nameless invitation. It was not meant, but more subtly than anything else that had yet happened, it seemed to incorporate them with that seething existence behind. They were not spectators any longer.

"This is Bella Janey's street."

And across children, and between their parents, they stopped at last before the rather imposing entrance of Bella Janey's house.

III

It was not only Bella Janey's, who had the right to but a fraction of it; and it rose above them, one of half-a-dozen, reminiscent of prosperity. Three steps, for instance, led to the threshold of a panelled front door, flanked by wooden pilasters, elaborately fluted. It was upon the topmost of these steps, though extending to them all, that two ponderous matrons sat taking the air, of whom one, at any rate, affected a certain suspicion.

"Well, dearies," she said, "and what may *you* be after?"

But the other, pushing her in the ribs, swung round a little to form an aperture.

"Go on," she said, "it's Mrs. Moxey's clergyman—wot comes to old 'er 'and—good-evenin', Mister"

"Good-evening," said Father Matthews, "and thank you very much."

His was that form of deafness which disappears a little in a tumult; but Mr. Thompson could never be certain how easily he heard. Two children, led by some instinct, ran up the passage in the darkness. It did not appear that the old man knew

them, but he let them hold his hands for a moment.

"Mrs. Moxey's been sick," they volunteered with importance, "been sickin' up awful, she 'ave. We 'eard 'er."

A man, bandaged round the head, came down the staircase. They stood aside to let him pass, but he stumbled against one of the children.

"Gawd damn yez," he said, "get out of it," and at the same moment, from a back room, a shrill voice called them to come in, promising alternative chastisement.

They began to climb the stairs.

"But oughtn't she to be in hospital herself?" asked Mr. Thompson.

Father Matthews shook his head.

"There's no hospital in London," he said, "for cases like hers. They're too crowded already to take in relapses of tubercle."

"What about a sanatorium?"

"She had four months of that last year. And they seemed to have pretty well patched her up. But this pregnancy has started the trouble once more. Besides, she won't leave her husband and babies."

"Does he drink?"

Father Matthews nodded.

"But not quite so much, she says, when she's at home to make him comfortable."

Two young women, each suckling a baby, looked up at them from the first landing. Both were pale from recent confinements, and with their hair rolled in curlers. Father Matthews stopped for a moment

and said a few words to them; and they pulled back their shawls, revealing breasts and infants.

Mrs. Moxey, they thought, had been rather bad most of the day, what with the sickness and her husband took away to the hospital. They were very sorry, of course, though she was one as always kept herself to herself. But they thought that Miss Jenkins had been seeing to her a little.

The two men climbed on, and Father Matthews mentioned a local doctor.

"Little Sanders," he said, "is being very good to her. He even thinks that she may recover a bit, though this sickness has been troublesome."

From a door on their right a very old man peeped out at them; and another door, on their left, was slammed with hostility.

"She has the top room in the front," said Father Matthews. "It's the best in the house, and gets the evening sunshine"—he stopped again to pant a little—"but you pay for it in stairs."

They found her sitting on the bed in a clean night-gown with a shawl over it, one bare foot tucked under her, and the other, quite a pretty one, half-resting on the carpet. In her arms lay the baby whom she was feeding from a bottle; but though the window was wide open, a fire in the grate had made the atmosphere of the room almost intolerably oppressive. Some flannels, too, recently wrung from a tin bath of hot water, hung steaming over a string between two picture-nails in the corner; and over the grief that filled her eyes flitted a veil of guilt.

"Bella Janey," said Father Matthews, "you've

been breaking your orders "; and for a moment, indeed, with a splash of colour in her cheeks and her hair drawn back tightly and roughly plaited into a pigtail, she might almost have been the little girl that his voice suggested. Then the five-year-old knelt up sleepily in the cot at the bed's foot, blinking alternately at the new-comers and his mother.

"Lie down again, Joey," she cried; "lie down again directly. I *had* to wash them out. We was gettin' that short. And it does me good to move about a little."

She looked half shyly at Mr. Thompson with her bright, dark eyes; and it was only when she looked down again at the baby on her knees that he saw how drawn was the skin over her cheek-bone and temple. Then she swayed a little, and made a groping movement with the hand that held the bottle; and Father Matthews, stooping over her, took it away from her, and gave it to Mr. Thompson. He gave him the baby also. And next moment Bella Janey was sick, drawing her breath in gasps, and with the sweat trickling down her face.

"Oh, I thought it 'ad stopped," she said, "I thought it 'ad give over."

Father Matthews laid her back on the pillow, and lifted her feet into the bed. With his handkerchief, not seeing a towel, he wiped her lips, the five-year-old, wide awake, watching him do so with big eyes.

"I want to kiss you," he began to shout, "I want to kiss you, Mummy dear."

She was hardly attractive just then, but Joey was not yet a man of the world.

"Let me 'ave 'im," she pleaded, "let me 'ave 'im jest 'alf a moment."

She would never kiss the children on their mouths. They had taught her that at the sanatorium. But below his curls at the back Joey possessed an understudy in dimples. She dropped a kiss into it, and something else; while, on Mr. Thompson's knee, the smaller man, his brother, closed his eyes for sleep. Then with both these men disposed of, what could she do but think of the third?

"Oh, my man," she sobbed, "my Tom, my Tom."

IV

Into a polite history Miss Jenkins need intrude no further than to promise that she will sit up with poor Mrs. Moxey while the reverends go to the hospital for tidings of Tom. She was quite willing to go herself, now that she had done her shopping. But they would see how it was. The reverends would be more likely to obtain satisfaction. And meantime she could set the room to rights, and make a nice cup of Bovril. For Miss Jenkins was kind, though it was to be feared not good. And Joey, at any rate, loved her vehemently, better than anything except mummy.

It was quite dark now, perhaps as dark as the short night would ever be, and the bell of a church near at hand struck the first quarter after ten. But this street and the narrow court into which it immediately led them were still thronged with loungers seeking a respite from the heat.

With the closing in of night, too, shutting away the fabric of the city, a kind of spurious liberty seemed to have descended upon its inhabitants. It was hardly more than that, with the chains still clanking behind the laughter; and yet, during this hour with Bella Janey, something quite definite seemed to have been withdrawn from them—some reservation, Mr. Thompson thought, in response to a change in himself. What this might be, he was unable to tell. It was almost, indeed, as if he had received, not for himself, but as Father Matthews' comrade, the seal of some mysterious initiation—as if he had been accorded the freedom, at least, of all these watchers in the streets.

"We don't know you," he could have imagined them saying, "we don't know you, but Bella Janey is one of us. We don't know you, but you are on Bella Janey's business——" and in consequence, each separate existence, grown suddenly careless of his presence, had been lifted for him into a new significance. Dark-eyed Bella Janey, each the centre of a universe, glanced at him, or did not trouble to glance. Bella Janey yet ungrown ran hither and thither about him on the pavement. And behind even the most brazen of Miss Jenkinses rose a vision of peroxide curls bending over that top front pillow.

They had emerged now from the region of dock walls into a denser and more alien population. Foreign sentences began to run about the streets and strange names to appear upon the windows; while the shut doors of an older religion looked suspiciously upon their Anglican cloth. Yet even

here some influence born of Bella Janey seemed to have outrun them and been already at work, some swift and invisible agent, suppressing this, and lifting that to their eyes.

They crossed the High Street, and it showed them, grouped at a corner, a barrel-organ trilling lustily at the road-side—making dance-music for a quartette of little Jewesses. They stopped to look at them, keeping perfect time and rhythm, each face the careful tenant of a profound but serious joy. And watching them also, with smiling eyes, Mr. Thompson saw two full-grown girls, framed in the shadow of a passage entrance. They were not beautiful, as hitherto he had always regarded beauty, and from the faces of them both the half-impudent, half-sorry habit had retreated, no doubt, only for a moment. But as they stood there, the younger leaning against her friend, both ripe for motherhood, and with their bare arms linked, they completed, over this unlovely living, a conquest that he would never forget.

Then he turned round a little to find the author of the miracle—the stolid, unshaven musician, by whose effort the whole tableau had been evoked. And Father Matthews, as though divining his thought, put some of it into words.

“Not so greatly to be despised, after all,” he said, and Mr. Thompson nodded his head.

“I wonder,” he replied, “if in all my life, I’ve done anything half so good.”

V

Each step now was taking them sensibly into a larger London, with street vistas to right and left of them, beaded with lights. In many of these the shops were still open and humming with commerce, while the groups of men and women became larger as they drew close to the main river of traffic. They crossed Cable Street, whence, from an upper window, loud cries of 'murder' were descending upon a little mob of brown-wigged women. But they ceased suddenly, and a policeman on point duty assured them that they meant exactly the reverse.

"She's been doin' it all the afternoon," he explained, and next moment the screams began again, to be drowned presently, under the railway arch, by the echoing passage of two trains. Here, too, for the first time, they had to shoulder their way a little, and already at the end of the street they could see trams sliding in opposite directions, full of passengers and brilliantly lit.

It would have been hard in such a place for any scream to pierce far, and there was certainly no room for barrel-organs; and but for Tom, indeed, alive or dead, at their journey's end, even Bella Janey might have ebbed back from them down this mighty stream. They met it again in the Whitechapel Road, deeper, if not quite so turbulent; from which they turned at last into the hospital—that great back-water, itself so still, but with the wreckage ticking into it with such a remorseless regularity.

By the big clock here it was already nearly eleven, but from his seat in the entrance hall Mr. Thompson could see that, in the receiving-room, there were still some patients waiting for treatment. This was a large room, in communication with several others—dressing-rooms for men and women and sitting-rooms for the medical officers and sister. Screens stood about in it for the shelter of more serious cases; and over the whole presided the atmosphere of a complete and detailed efficiency. It could never, one felt, be taken by surprise, or found at any loss in an emergency.

He watched the surgeon in charge dealing with this perennial group of sufferers—an unobtrusive young man, probably a couple of years his junior, but with a leisurely speed about his movements that Mr. Thompson found peculiarly engrossing. Into this welter of life, through which they had just been passing, he was the impinging-point of a new current. He was the priest, as it were, of a cult that ancestrally might claim a part of cousinship with his own. And there was a terse self-confidence in his speech that was obviously infecting his patients.

From where he sat, Mr. Thompson could see the faces of these as they rose in turn to state their troubles—faces hectic, sullen, or spiritual, but each inscribed with an unquestioning trust, if not in this actual young man, in the order, at any rate, to which he belonged. Nor had there been here any need for the exhibition of an elaborate ritual. These people had not waited to be cajoled.

They had come instantly to something that was manifest.

He examined the young man once more and a companion, who had now joined him, bronzed from a day on the river, and wearing a Leander ribbon. They exchanged a few familiar words, and in a minute or two the new-comer reappeared in a white coat, taking up his predecessor's work with precisely the same unhurrying certainty. Then Father Matthews returned from his inquiries, and a young house-surgeon, on his way from the telephone, stopped for a minute in front of them.

"It's settled," he said, "that there's to be an operation. But I'm afraid it'll be a couple of hours before I can tell you anything definite."

He left them to their long vigil, and the slow movement of the clock on the wall. And it became clear then to Mr. Thompson that these young men had not come easily to their present positions. For they were here not only as representatives, but because they themselves *knew*—imperfectly, no doubt, and with a knowledge fluid for change, but such, at least, as conferred upon them an authority that stood in no need of commendation. Real authority, he supposed, never did. It had only to be lifted up, and it drew all men unto it. And real knowledge, perhaps, had always been its cross.

VI

"But do you think that knowledge," he asked, "in—in *our* realm is possible?"

They were standing again at Bella Janey's door

in a street that was hushed at last, but with the knocker-up already grey above the house-tops.

"Yes," said Father Matthews, "I think so; but only, perhaps, at first hand," and even before he spoke, Mr. Thompson knew, not only that this was so, but that in Bella Janey's lifted face he had beheld its recognition—as absolute, upon another plane, as in those others before the doctor.

"Will you come up with me," said Father Matthews, "and tell her the good news?"

But Mr. Thompson shook his head.

"No," he said, "it isn't me that she wants to see."

For this also had become certain, that though these people, Father Matthews, the bishop, even that queer doctor and his sister, possessed in their varying degrees this strange secret in common, they could not impart it to him even if they would. At the most, their truer relationships could only be his hand-rail out of play-acting.

Yet presently, when Father Matthews rejoined him, he could not help turning to him again impulsively.

"These multitudes," he said, "tell me—how am I to help them?"

They began to retrace their steps towards St. Ninian's. But it was not until they stood once more upon the drawbridge that the old priest came out of his reverie.

"Yes," he said then, "that was my mistake too"—a slow smile crept up into his eyes—"I set out to conquer the multitudes, and forgot the ones."

The pressure of his hand upon Mr. Thompson's arm increased a little.

"Don't do that," he said. "Don't waste the years like I did. For there are no multitudes in the end—not even the types that you young men are so fond of. There are only the ones. There are no other gates into knowledge."

Mr. Thompson's archway dwindled to a wicket.

"And there's generally one, you know, standing open just in front."

"But not for me, I'm afraid," said Mr. Thompson.

"Not one?"

His mind ran out over this sleeping London. It envisaged—a trifle unexpectedly—an elderly lady in the Sulgrave Road.

"Except Mummy, of course," he said doubtfully.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

It was in this way, then—and quite possibly upon this actual bridge—that the future sphere of his desires first announced itself to Mr. Thompson. For though Circumstance, as it must now become this narrative's task to explain, was to shut it away from him temporarily, if not indeed for ever, it was always London that continued to lie ultimately before him—a debt of honour, as it seemed to him, that he must at least attempt to repay. To the acute observer, moreover, another fact will have emerged, that though Mr. Thompson remained still naked of a message, he had rather definitely confessed himself as desiring to possess one—a combination as perilous, perhaps, as any that can be conceived.

Looking back, therefore, over these few weeks that succeeded his return from Kilridge, there are two particulars in which he must almost certainly be counted fortunate—that the one or two people who have been described as providing for him a hand-rail were scrupulous to become only a very little more than this; and that one of them, at any rate, thought that Mummy might be important.

The immediate difficulty, of course, consisted in

getting Mummy to perceive this. Wicket-gateways into knowledge lay beyond her range. That her Albert, indeed, at his time of life, should be in need of such an article seemed, on the face of it, entirely improbable; and that she herself could provide it, patently grotesque.

"No," she said firmly. "I don't see it at all. Let me spread you another slice. You've been a very good son to me."

She nodded her curls at him emphatically, and, for the first time in some years, Mr. Thompson took the opportunity of examining them rather carefully—in accordance with his new principles, but with a sinking heart. Did Mummy really not know how awful they were?

While she argued, too, he examined again this little room in which she dwelt; and it seemed to him, as he did so, that everything in it was wrong, not in itself, perhaps, but in conjunction with all the rest. Even grandfather's gentility, in its place of honour, had become curiously anæmic against the wall-paper tulips—just as the tulips shrank visibly, cowed but resentful, from the peonies on the carpet and the plush brackets round the overmantel. He had never noticed these things before, or, if he had, they had seemed unimportant to him. And even now, not being an artist, as he soberly informed himself, he would find it difficult to explain their precise effect. He only knew that, combined, their discord was annoying to him.

He rose abruptly from the table, and turned round towards the window, pushing the curtains

aside, and looking out across the road. There were no houses immediately opposite—a wooden fence separating the pavement from a narrow strip of ground planted with various kinds of vegetables. And beyond these, below their level, lay the Shepherd's Bush Railway-station. A train had just left this, and as the white smoke disappeared, he could read the enamelled advertisements above the up-platform; over which again, farther away, rose the shop-backs of the Goldhawk Road. The weather was dull and rather windy, and down the middle of the roadway two pieces of newspaper chased a crumpled paper-bag; while upon the kerbstone, close at hand, lay the discarded head of a mackerel.

He dropped the c~~oins~~, and looked back again at the lady who had given him his life, and subsequently shared as much of it as he had deemed compatible with his success. But she showed no signs of discontent. She had even become typical of her surroundings.

"Do you like this place, Mummy?" he asked her gravely.

Mummy had prepared the next slice now. Yes, she liked it very well. It was so healthy, she thought, and open, with a bit of green to look at opposite. And though Maria was a chit, her auntie was obliging if unrefined.

"You're not lonely?" asked Mr. Thompson, sitting down again at the table.

Mummy looked a little suspicious,

"Of course," she said, "I'm always very glad to see you, dee-ree."

But that wasn't exactly what Mr. Thompson had meant. Well then, no, Mummy was hardly a bit lonely—not to say *lonely*, the vicar's wife being a nice lady, and why wasn't Albert drinking his tea?

"D'you know, Mummy," he said suddenly, "that I was very nearly drowned?"

Mummy's jaw dropped distinctly. Albert so seldom made a joke. He told her his story very briefly.

"And you'd have been the only person," he said, "who would have cared twopence."

But Mummy had turned a little white. She saw those dark waters rolling between them. She was not so young, quite, as she used to be. Soon enough they would be real. They stared at one another over the teapot.

'She's all I have.'

'I suckled him.'

He took her in his arms. They looked ridiculous. The Sulgrave Road fell away from them.

"I knew it was all wrong," he said, "I tried to think it was the carpet."

But this, too, was beyond Mummy, who must keep calm for Mr. Thompson's sake.

"Oh, *lord*," said Mr. Thompson, "what a beast I've been to you."

"No, you 'aven't," said Mummy stoutly, "I've always said—I've always said——"

"Now, look here, Mummy dear, dying oath, would you like to live with me?"

"No, I wouldn't," said Mummy, "and what's the matter with the carpet?"

"It's not the carpet," said Mr. Thompson, "I told you that before; or the wall-paper; or the brackets; or the wax peaches; or the mackerel; or the artichokes; or Bean-Fed Bacon; or the back of the Goldhawk Road. It's a—it's a Mummy without a home. And that's bound to be wrong, you know."

"But you can't live with me."

"Why not?"

"There's your career."

"It's got to hold two of us, then."

"But what about Father Lucy?"

"What about you?"

Mummy stuck to her guns.

"Not if I'll spoil your career."

"But perhaps you'll make it."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know. We don't either of us know. We can't know till we begin."

"You aren't—you aren't giving up the church, Albert?"

"I don't even know that. But I'm not giving up you. I should like to smash those peaches. Do you think I might?"

"Oh, Albert, they're Mrs. Parkins's."

"Then I suppose I mustn't."

There was a knock at the door.

"Oh, Albert—my hair!"

"We must do it up again—another way."

II

He looked back down the Sulgrave Road, before he turned the corner. Were all the Siberias like

that, he wondered, to which rising men sent their Mummies ?

"I didn't know," said Vavas seur later, "that your mother was still alive."

He had lounged into Mr. Thompson's room, pipe in hand, and dropped comfortably into an arm-chair between the desk and the prie-dieu.

"No," said Mr. Thompson, "I've always kept her pretty dark."

Vavas seur squinted down his pipe-stem, and began to wish that he hadn't come.

"I was afraid," said Mr. Thompson, "that she might handicap my advancement."

Vavas seur crossed his legs uneasily, and looked up at the ceiling.

"She used to sell programmes at a theatre, and sometimes drops her h's."

Then Vavas seur made up his mind, and turned his eyes towards Mr. Thompson, who met them with his own, and nodded comprehendingly.

"Yes," he said slowly, "that's the sort of animal I am."

Vavas seur opened his mouth, and shut it again.

"Then why did you tell me all this ?" he asked at last.

"Oh, I don't know," said Mr. Thompson, "I suppose you'd guessed it long ago ?"

Vavas seur stared at him for a minute longer and then catching sight of his own volume, *The Jesus of Q*, he reached out for it lazily, and began to turn its pages.

"Been looking at this at all ?" he said.

"I finished it last night," said Mr. Thompson.

"Did you like it?"

"It interested me enormously. I had only thought of Q, you know, till just lately, as a popular novelist."

Vavas seur grinned.

"It didn't disturb you in any way?" he inquired.

Mr. Thompson shook his head.

"No," he said, "I don't think so—or not very much."

Vavas seur produced one or two of his smoke-rings.

"It occurred to you, I suppose, that if Q is to be the last word, a lot of our religion must go by the board?"

"Must it?"

"Well—it means that about two-thirds of what Christ is supposed to have said was put into His mouth by other people to explain what He did say."

"So I understood."

"It means that the whole theory of the atonement becomes purely Pauline; that Christ never expressed any belief in the resurrection of His body; or instituted a eucharist; or gave power of remission."

"I see that the eucharist," said Mr. Thompson, "is suggested there as being an adaptation by Paul of the Eleusis mystery."

"Well, if that's right, doesn't it seem to you to make any difference?"

Mr. Thompson considered.

"I can see that it would affect our present Catholic doctrine and ideas of priesthood."

"Of course the whole thing has been denied, you know, as well as the existence of Q."

"So I see by the appendix. But the author seems to me to be a first-rate scholar, who has written with moderation, and given a lifetime to the evidence."

"Equally eminent scholars are in the opposite camp."

"How do you know?"

Vavas seur mentioned some names.

"But how do you know, you yourself, that they are as competent to explore documents, and weigh testimonies?"

"Well, of course," admitted Vavas seur, "I'm not a committee of Regius professors."

"That's just what I mean," said Mr. Thompson. "It can't be *religion* that depends on these specialists; on—on our Uncle William's knowledge of Aramaic."

Vavas seur replaced the book on the desk.

"What do you mean by religion, then?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Thompson, "I only know that I haven't got any. Look here, am I boring you? Your pipe's gone out."

He stooped forward, and took a match from a little jar near the ink-stand. Then he stopped suddenly.

"I hadn't thought of it before," he said, "but I've an idea that religion must be something like this. The day before yesterday I should have been using a flint and steel. And to-morrow I may be using something not yet invented. To-day I'm using these"—he struck the match against the jar—"but *that's* been the same all along."

The light flickered up between them.

"That's what religion is—if it's anything. That's what God must be. That's what I want."

Vavas seur took the match from his fingers.

"And the Church, you mean, is just this?" he said, holding it up to his pipe.

Mr. Thompson nodded.

"Made by the specialists," he said, "when flint and steel stood in the way of more light."

Vavas seur smoked for a minute in silence.

"Well, if it *works*," he said presently, "that's the chief thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. But so did the coaches till Puffing Billy came along."

"But what have you got against it," asked Vavas seur, "you yourself, as you would say?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Mr. Thompson, "that I have anything against it—except, of course, that it has been possible for me to be its priest. I haven't got anything to judge it with."

Vavas seur rose to his feet, and put a hand on Mr. Thompson's shoulder.

"If you're wise, you know," he said, "you won't talk like this to old Lucy."

"I shall have to talk to him about Mummy," said Mr. Thompson.

"Why Mummy?" smiled Vavas seur.

"Because she's the only thing I'm sure about."

He was not even sure, indeed, when Vavas seur had gone, whether he ought to send this letter in his top drawer; where it had lain now for nearly three days with Berenice's name upon the envelope.

Later in the evening, however, he decided that he would do so, and posted it in the nearest pillar-box.

CHAPTER XIX

I

AND yet by now it seems to have become clear that this was not really an important letter. For though it may have cost Mr. Thompson perhaps as much as three hours' slumber, a dispassionate survey of the tapestry into which its career was to be woven cannot find it to have been essential to the final pattern. But for Selina, indeed, it might almost have been trivial enough to ignore; and even in spite of her, it hardly stands closer to the events that followed it than a chance kite flying against a storm—the registration of something past rather than the seed of anything future.

That, on the other hand, this can be urged as an excuse for Selina cannot, of course, for a moment be admitted. It would be difficult, in fact, to discover any excuses at all, save that of an idleness perhaps, for which her elders may have been responsible, and in their defence it may very reasonably be claimed that every little girl should at times be given a holiday.

Moreover, by no possible stretch of indulgence, can the circumstances be called even extenuating. For though Mr. Turpin, late gunner in the Royal Field Artillery, and now Rural Postman, Kilridge

S.O. to Stack, ought no doubt to have delivered his letters at the house, to whom more justifiably should he have been able to trust them than to its legitimate daughter, so perfectly well known to him ?

It would save, too, not only himself, but a corn sub-acutely inflamed the matter of perhaps a quarter of a mile—well worth doing, as was perfectly obvious, in every one's interests all round.

"Very kind of you, miss, I'm sure, miss," he said, "what with the thunder about, an' me corn, an' all."

"Poor old Turpie!" said Selina. "But that's my nature, you know. I suppose there's not a letter for me?"

Mr. Turpin ran a professional eye over the Windy correspondence.

"Sir George's *Pink 'Un*," he said, "beg pardon, miss—two letters as I takes to be bills for Master William, and one for Miss Berry-nice."

"All right, Turpie," said Selina, "shove 'em on the gatepost, will you? And how's the poor corn?"

Mr. Turpin struck the delicate balance between personal familiarity and respect to lineage, between exact truth and military fortitude, with the precision of experience.

"Well, 'ardly better, miss," he said, "not in a manner of speakin'—though I'm not sayin' as it 'aven't been worse in its time. I could do with a bit o' gate-swingin' meself," he shifted his bag, and brought his hand up to the salute, "but you're lookin' 'earty, miss, anyways."

"Well, I don't know about hearty exactly, Turps," said Selina; "as a matter of fact, I'm feeling rather *svelte*."

He stared at her for a moment, and then blushed a little.

"Well, it 'ave been a bit muggy-like," he agreed tactfully, and turned manfully eastward up the hill.

"Silly old fathead," said Selina, from the top bar, "I wonder what he thought I was driving at?"

She watched him go for a little while, and yawned; and then, with a vigorous but tempered contraction of her leg, pushed the gate, with herself upon it, away from the square-topped post. Three times she performed this movement, the result being, in each case, to propel herself into a zone upon the other side of the drive, from which, after a moment's latent period, the white gate swung clattering back again. A stronger impulse, and this zone would have been passed, the gate resting open against the laurels; while a weaker one would have failed to reach it and the interval of doubt that lent zest to the exercise.

It will be seen, then, that as an achievement of some skill, its thrice repetition would have been a matter for congratulation had not Selina's record, in this respect, already attained double figures. And now at the fourth attempt, having landed herself permanently in the laurels, she felt as disinclined to begin rivalling it again as to do almost anything else that suggested itself. Had Mademoiselle not been in France, upon a well-

earned holiday, she would no doubt have been grumbling over "prep." Had Berenice not been at Eastbourne, they might have gone down together to Basin Pool. But she had already bathed during most of the morning and throughout the entire afternoon; tea was over, and supper not yet in sight; the gate could not be closed again without dismounting and pushing it; the horizon was empty; and the middle distance only contained Turpie. There remained, therefore, the foreground alone, bisected by the wooden gate-post, upon which, as upon a wayside altar, the greater world had left its tribute—Sir George's *Pink 'Un*, a periodical that bored her; two communications for Bill, with tradesmen's names upon the envelopes, and one letter, in an unfamiliar handwriting, addressed to Miss Chote.

So they rested there, a little group beyond the gravelled entrance to the drive, cheek by jowl upon the post as Mr. Turpin had left them—each the product of some brain, or many brains, a world away; each presenting towards Windy its separate attitude and appeal. And to Selina's eyes, thoughtful and a little dangerously blasé, they assumed, very slowly, the chief position in the landscape. She would examine them again, at any rate, before she took them up to the house. She would slip the *Pink 'Un*, maybe, from its chaster girdle, if this could be done without disturbing either. She would make quite certain that Berenice's letter was indeed intended for her sister. She slid down upon the drive, and drew the gate behind her, climbing up, before it slammed

again, to her seat upon the top. She extended a brown hand towards the letters. Berenice's chanced to lie uppermost. She saw that it bore the postmark of Poplar, pondered a moment, and then leapt suddenly to the conclusion that it could have come from no other than Mr. Thompson. Only, why should he want to write to Berenice? For he couldn't think—he *surely* couldn't think——?

"But, oh lord!" she said, "just supposing he does?"

She dropped the letter, face upwards, into the serge hammock between her knees; and as she did so, lifting her eyes again, the whole world became a grin—green downs, grey sea, and the sullen sky above them both. She saw Mr. Thompson, as she had first seen him upon the station platform at Banner. She saw Berenice, with more affection, but at least an equal candour. Forces hitherto unsuspected marched with drums across her universe, ta-ran-ta-ra, ta-ran-ta-ra, and boredom vanished before their flags.

"Oh—my—aunt," she said, "how absolutely topping!"

She became silent again, rocking herself to and fro, reconstructing, appraising; and all the time, upon her lap, lay Mr. Thompson's letter, delivered into her hands, staring helplessly up at her. She lifted it again between her finger and thumb. There was evidently, she thought, not more than one sheet of it; and perhaps, after all, it was only about something that he had forgotten—a tooth-brush, a sponge-bag, or something that he had left behind him at Windy. Only, if that were the case,

surely he would have discovered its loss before, in the subsequent ten days of his visit at Kilridge, or more immediately upon his return to St. Ninian's, Poplar.

Yes, that was the name of the show. She remembered it now. Because she had wondered exactly who St. Ninian might have been. And what more likely, indeed, than that Mr. Thompson should have become enamoured of the lady fair who had rescued him from drowning? Why, nothing in the world, considered thus in the abstract; and if the lady had not been Berenice she would no doubt have thought of all this before. But, of course, with one's own sister—and yet, again, when one came to think of it, most ladies fair were probably somebody's sisters.

Still holding the letter, she gazed out again across the hills, sliding down towards the bay against a monotonous strip of sea. The laughter had died from them now, but not without changing them by its passage. They seemed to have become remoter than they used to be—remoter and more grave. They seemed to be watching what she would do. She bent forward a little, looking up and down the road. She felt her cheeks becoming hot. She tore open the envelope, and read the letter.

II

And after all, she thought, it could hardly be called a love-letter. But then, if that were the case, why should it have been written at all? Why should Barker have to be told about Mr.

Thompson's inner self ? And why, since it seemed to be such an unpleasant one, should Mr. Thompson have wanted to describe it ? Could he be endeavouring to put her off ? Had Berenice made love to *him* ?

"Good lord !" she said, "she can't have made love to him."

She read the letter through once more, quite cool again now that the opening of it had become irrevocable, but a little bewildered by the region into which so unexpectedly it had lifted her—a little annoyed, too, that these mysteries should have come into being without her knowledge ; and aware, deep down, that she had been permanently checkmated.

For now it was as though something, apart from either, had shut away from her both Mr. Thompson and her sister. They were no longer susceptible to her methods. She could not manipulate them even a little. She tapped her teeth with the envelope, frowning at the August afternoon.

'We have left you behind,' they might have been saying to her. 'You are only an ignorant little girl.'

Lolling back in his *Mercédès*, Dick drew up before the gate. It had been Cowes week, and since Sunday he had been yachting with some friends in the Solent ; and the salt air had deepened visibly the rich colour of his face and hands.

"Hullo, kidlet," he said easily, "is Barker anywhere about ?"

For a moment or two, still uncertain of this new country, she found it a little difficult to bring him

into focus. And when she had done so she seemed to detect, even in him, something strange and a little proprietary.

"If you mean Berenice," she said slowly, "she's paying a visit at Eastbourne."

She saw that his dark eyes widened a little; but the Chotes were at least physically courageous.

"Well, that's whom I did mean," he said. "She never told me that she was going away."

"Ought she to have done?" asked Selina.

Dick looked her up and down again, and then smiled.

"What's the matter?" he inquired. "Tummy?"

"No, thank you," said Selina. "Thank you very much."

He started the engine again.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said, "to have to leave you."

"There's no message that I could give her?" said Selina: "Or would you like, perhaps, to know her address?"

She saw at once that this was probably a mistake.

He put the brake on, looking back at her over his shoulder.

"Yes, I would," he said promptly. "What is it?"

"The Continental Hotel, Eastbourne."

Then he waved his hand to her, as the car ran down the hill; and Selina, gathering up the letters, turned slowly from the gate towards the house.

III

From the bottom of the valley, Dick swung sharply to the right up the deep lane that leads from Kilridge to the main road below the Durling Hills. For this was Friday, and, in deference to a rather urgent note from his father, he had cut short his visit to the Kimptons in order to spend the weekend at Creel.

At any other time such a summons—and he had to acknowledge that they were quite rare—would most probably have displeased him, though he would, no doubt, have obeyed it. But on the present occasion, though it did not promise him anything particularly amusing, it had, at any rate, provided him with an excuse for leaving a party of which he had grown tired. For though Kimpton himself was quite a pleasant old fellow, full of money, but unpretentious, and the virtual founder of modern Duckmouth, it was his wife who had been responsible, apparently, for the selection of the guests—nondescript young people, for the most part, interested in art and letters, with an elderly actress or two, rather stridently propagandist.

About his well-groomed head, as the typically healthy Philistine, theories novel and anarchic had shuttled constantly for days. Gentlemen, whose names, in other spheres, seemed to be household words, had been quoted to him in defence of movements of which he had never before heard—and this in spite of the fact that he had always taken a certain amount of pride in keeping himself

pretty well informed upon the latest developments in all these matters. Had he not done so, indeed, perhaps the stress would have been less severe. It was the polite exposure of his little knowledge that had evoked all these experts. For what he had learnt, it appeared, was already reactionary before he had discovered it. And in the end, though it had been obvious that they all delighted in instructing him, he had not been sorry to wave his hand to them from Lord Kimpton's pinnacle.

Moreover—well born, wealthy, used to mastery, and intelligent—and, above all these, physically fit, he had a vague conviction that he actually *was* what all these artist-people were yearning for. Their poetry and all the rest of it merely sprang from the gulf between them. It was the measure of their self-consolation for what nature had denied them. And, for himself, he really did what these other people only hymned.

He took the sinuous road that climbs the face of the Durling Hills, wondering, since this evening he had been able to get a run at it, if he could reach a certain field-gate on his car's top speed. He succeeded in doing this, making a mental note of it, and then, dropping through his second to his lowest, let his engines, running sweetly, carry him up towards the crest. With his attention relaxed, too, for the moment, from the working of the car, his eye resumed quite unconsciously its fundamental attitude to the world. He looked down from this steep hillside upon a coast-land mapped into estates. He saw the leaner acres of the Chotes interdigitating with his own, with here and there

a yeoman freehold to dispute their monopoly; and scattered about over them all, though the hour grew late, an appointed order of workers, born to their task, and still busy with binder and waggon stripping the harvest from the fields.

It was a good sight, revealing to him once more the smaller farm or two that ought to be bought in, not only to round off his own property at Stack, but to complete the link that should make it continuous with the larger inheritance of Creel. The crops, too, both oats and wheat, were heavy, heavier than they had been, he thought, for three or four years; and though the weather had been unsettled for the last week or ten days, there were signs this evening in the sky of a tendency to harden.

Then the narrowing ribbon of down, strung along the sky at his left hand, ran out suddenly to a point as he joined the road upon the crest; and to the fourteen hundred acres of Stack, lying below him on his right, were added the ten thousand of Creel with all England for a setting.

IV

He ran down, heavily braked, through the steep penumbra of the plantations, and at the gate of a private road, leading by a short route to the house, met a keeper who opened it for him, touching his cap respectfully. He was not an ideal keeper; and Dick, personally, would have got rid of him some time ago. But he represented a régime that he never publicly questioned; and though the man probably knew his feelings, there was no sign

of this in his face. He merely stood there, as regarded Dick, for the first outpost that he had encountered of his father's management of a trust that would some day be handed to himself—a management that he respected as being the only one possible at present, but informed by a temperament to which he had long ago found himself permanently a stranger.

But for this respect, indeed, and the unquestioned rights that each recognised in the other, there would have been occasions, as they both knew, when this latent hostility might very easily have assumed almost indecent proportions. And although, upon all other grounds, as he readily admitted, the old boy's tact was quite commensurate with his acknowledged position in the world, there were still danger-zones of conscience upon which Dick, for all his reticence, found it difficult to avoid trespassing—to his own annoyance and the self-infliction of much unnecessary pain by his father.

Something of all this, indeed, to any observer with some knowledge of the family would have been instantly visible in the hand-shake that took place between them on the terrace—tragic or humorous according to the spectator's outlook and the degree of his identification with either the father or the son. Even to the good-humoured bluntness of Lady Dygon, a vast person beaming across at them from the depths of a garden-chair, a situation that she never allowed to disturb her serenity, declared itself once again as she watched the ceremony; whereas to McLair the surgeon, with lesser rights to intimacy,

the combined defences of the two Boltons merely suggested a rather affecting greeting—two fine figures of men, each with the dignity of his age, shaking hands upon the steps of their historic abode.

They went into the hall together, Mr. Bolton's arm resting upon his son's, with the half-awkward attempt at comradeship that he always consciously made during the first few moments of their meeting after an interval.

"I'm very glad that you have come," he said, "for several reasons."

They turned together into the little office where the business of the estate was conducted. The secretary had gone home for the night, and Mr. Bolton pushed forward a box of cigarettes towards his son. He glanced for a moment into those dark eyes so unlike his own.

"I hope that my letter," he said, "didn't interfere too much with your arrangements."

Dick lit a cigarette, taking an armchair opposite his father's.

"Not at all," he said, "I was rather glad. I was getting a bit fed up with the Kimptons."

"You've been at Cowes?"

Dick nodded.

"Yes, on the *Thistle*," he said. "They'd got a party of poets. There was one of them, by the way, rather all over you, sir. You'd written him a letter, I think. Flaxman—or some such name."

"Ah, yes, the *Modern Adonis* man—first-rate work." Mr. Bolton smiled a little. "You haven't read it, I expect? I should have liked to meet him."

But Dick had read it, and it had bored him, though it did not seem worth while mentioning this. His father, who did not smoke, closed the lid of the cigarette-box.

"My real reason for wanting you to-night," he continued, "is that Ager has brought Remington down with him, and I thought that it would be an excellent opportunity for you to learn the ropes of this new land business of theirs."

"Which Ager?" asked Dick.

"Cyril," said his father. "He's giving an address, you know, to-morrow at the E.C.U. conference at Canchester. And both he and Remington are going on to speak for Topham in North Devon."

Dick mentioned the member for their own division, an elderly Liberal manufacturer known to be suffering from diabetes.

"Nothing fresh about old Spencer, I suppose?" he said.

"Not that I'm aware of," said Mr. Bolton, "but both Ager and Remington think this new 'Single Tax' cry with which Henderson and Carter have won these last two elections is likely to develop into something rather dangerous. That's why I thought that you would rather welcome the opportunity of talking things over with them."

Dick put down his cigarette.

"Yes, thanks very much," he said, "I expect you're right."

He stroked his moustache a little doubtfully.

"Of course, you know——" he began.

"I know that you've always had rather a

prejudice against both the Agers. But they're really good fellows, with a big future in front of them."

Dick pulled out his watch. It was nearly half past seven.

"Right you are," he said briefly. "Anybody else here? I saw old—I saw Lady Dygon."

"Only Lady Dygon and Ethel, and the McLairs," said his father.

The gong was struck for dressing-time. The two men rose to their feet.

"Er—there's only one thing more," said Mr. Bolton.

Dick recognised the tone.

"I rang you up just now, and they told me that you had driven over to Windy."

He paused for a moment, but Dick maintained a perfectly respectful silence, perceiving, but refusing to assist, in his father's eyes, the determined martyr tying himself up to the stake.

"I quite recognise, of course," said Mr. Bolton slowly, "that I haven't any right, perhaps, to make suggestions; but both for your own sake and—and ours here I should like you to be a little careful in your dealings with the Chotes."

Dick was still silent, but well entrenched behind the velvet mask, that always crept into his eyes when his privacy seemed threatened.

"I don't want to play the Pharisee," continued his father rather painfully, "but you must surely see the unwisdom of becoming in any degree intimate at a house that neither your aunt nor your own wife, when you come to marry, could possibly

visit, under existing circumstances. And at Creel here we have others besides ourselves to consider."

He smiled again, trying to finish lightly what had so heavily been begun.

"Even on the lowest grounds," he added, touching Dick's sleeve again with his hand, "one Chote, you know, is sufficient to make a peck of Radicals. And I don't want to stand by, and see you handicap the whole lot of us. When are you going up to Yorkshire?"

"Tuesday evening," said Dick, holding the door open for his father.

They went together up the big staircase and along the corridor to Dick's room.

"You must forgive me," said Mr. Bolton, "but you'll understand my position."

Their eyes met again, and Dick smiled.

"Oh, quite," he said agreeably. "I'm awf'ly sorry to have worried you."

He stood politely in the doorway, wondering if there were anything more to be unloaded. But his father merely shook his head a little as he turned away.

"Some day, you know," he observed, "you'll perhaps be playing this part yourself"—which was so true, with Mr. Bolton's own conviction so profound that their outward dignity, at least, would be equally safe with his son, that it would have been wiser, perhaps, for these particular scruples to have remained unspoken.

And yet, since on the present occasion they coincided so largely with Dick's own, the event might well be pleaded in justification. For while

Dick resented, as always, his father's method of presenting them, it occurred to him, as he dressed with his usual leisurely care, that, being so lively already, they might very imminently develop into the cause to himself of much future discomfort.

He tied his bow with a frown, not attempting to formulate any feelings that he might possess with regard to the Chotes in general and Berenice in particular; but foreseeing the possibility, at no very distant date, of one of those uncomfortable decisions of which he had already experienced a sufficiency—decisions that he never shirked when the appropriate moment came, but with which he had always refused prematurely to concern himself.

That was the constant gravamen, indeed, of his charge against his father, this disturbing propensity of anticipating trouble. For he surely knew, as they both knew, in their deepest hearts, who it was that must be sunk at any real moment of collision; and that his own hand would train the gun just as coolly as his father's. Only till then—*faites vos jeux, messieurs*—why consider hostilities?

Nevertheless, when half an hour later he took his place at the dinner-table, very handsome, and pleasantly conscious of it, in his evening clothes, it was with a Windy that ordinarily would have long ago faded from his mind still lurking there, like a light woman, in a forbidden square.

He leaned back in his chair, as though, for the first time in his life, he must listen deliberately to his world's judgment upon it—each syllable of all this talk rising up about him its sentence to a

remoter and more irrevocable banishment. He glanced involuntarily at the great window that filled up the wall on his left hand, against which the twilight, not yet frosted by the rising moon, had crept close, like some dark moth, to this soft candle-light within. He heard the shrill voice of Cyril Ager denouncing Church Disestablishment, and the thick chuckle of Lady Dygon trying to cope with him intelligently. He spoke mechanically to his aunt Joanna, presiding at this end of the table, and to Lady McLair whom he had taken in to dinner. He saw in front of him, across the flowers, the instructed eyes of Ethel Dygon, whom some day he was to marry, as they both foresaw with great distinctness; and behind her again, and the tall footman who was bending between her and McLair, the dark extent of the opposite wall—the rich mouldings of the fire-place, winking light at their angles; the two *cassones* of Uccelli upon its either side; and the ten-foot Perugino brooding mysteriously above.

His glance flickered back again down the length of his own side of the table, where beyond Lady McLair leaned the well-known profile of Mr. Remington—rather effective, but a little uneasy in the complete absence of a gallery. He saw his father at the table's head, where presently, when his turn came, he, too, would take his seat—desiring, after all, perhaps, to alter very little; and at his father's right again, Lady Dygon, quite resplendent in something pink, and supporting upon her bosom a large quantity of old paste. He rather liked Lady Dygon, and she took the oppor-

tunity of his scrutiny to send up, for his benefit, a humorous rocket of appeal.

"You and I," she seemed to be suggesting, in that characteristic gurgle of hers, "are a little bit out of all this sort of thing—what?"—but only in degree, madam, and not in kind.

For there flashed before him now—Windy's final exodus—the sudden picture, not of Berenice, indeed, but of Lollie Jameson, seated by mischance in that particular chair. And when he smiled back at Lady Dygon, it was as the heir-apparent, who would no doubt, in days to come, learn to cherish High Church peers, though scarcely, perhaps, with his father's enthusiasm.

Then realising that all this time he had been feeling both hungry and thirsty, he withdrew abruptly from surmise; and spilling the cream that was being handed to him very liberally into his soup, discussed the building of summer-houses with Lady McLair. . . .

V

From all of which it will be seen that, running postwards in the moonlight, a certain conclusion of Selina's must be somewhat modified; and that only then can it be permissible to discover, shadowy upon her arm, the oldest story in the world creeping back with her to Windy.

CHAPTER XX

I

"Do not leave us till you must."

"We always know the big things. We have never any doubt of them." During the six weeks that elapsed before Father Lucy returned, Mr. Thompson was content to let them swing, a lantern upon each side of his every-day duties. For although, as he saw very clearly, they could never become his own, they were at any rate being swung by people whose power was apparent to him; and hardly yet, as he daily told himself, had he even begun to realise how astonishingly important people were.

For the moment, indeed, that represented, more fully, perhaps, than anything else, the external result of all these recent happenings—the slow re-clothing for him of every dogma, every paragraph and picture with its once visible human body. Even this newspaper in his hand, for instance, hitherto so impersonal, was no more, after all, than but a dozen men talking to him. The fourteenth chapter of St. John, Westminster Abbey, the creeds, had all once been contained, whenever derived, in various small boys who had probably slapped their sisters; just as some gospel yet undreamed might even now be on tiptoe behind those grimy

little lips wondering if he had got a cigarette-picture.

It was not an original discovery. He knew that, of course, quite well. It was only the corollary, indeed, of what he had seen in his bedroom at Windy. And while each individual struggler, upon this new wave of perception, had thus been raised for him into an almost dazzling prominence, it was only at the price, surely, of a God that was slowly being submerged *en route*—or in the next trough? He could not tell.* And meanwhile—well, meanwhile there was Mummy.

For Father Matthews had been right, more right, perhaps, than he knew; and upon his decision in the little parlour at Sulgrave Road this new thing, this Knowledge, with an extraordinary simplicity, had quite suddenly become part of his experience—a knowledge of his whole being, a thing as much more than learning as the actual thrill of movement than its printed formula on paper.

There was not much of it, it was true—the merest tremor. But for the first time in his life there had entered into him this permanent standard of comparison. Tiny but authentic, it was the flickering up of his own flame; and by its light he could now test, and even in a certain degree take, each new step that was to lie before him.

Father Lucy, a little stouter, very sunburned and prosperous, leaned back in his chair, and regarded him over his finger-tips. With his knowledge of the world merely ripened a little in the interval, he saw at once that behind Mummy lurked some-

thing more important; of which he possessed, too, as he imagined, a pretty accurate idea. Unobtrusively, therefore, and more than half for his own amusement, he pushed a pawn into what seemed to him the strategic square.

"But if we could make arrangements," he suggested, "to accommodate your mother in the parish, you would then, no doubt, see your way to remain with us?"

It became evident that Mr. Thompson had not considered this possibility.

"Well, I—I hardly know," he said, "but if you would have me——"

He looked meditatively at Father Lucy, at his firm cheeks and level eyes. From the first moment of their interview he had seen that explanation would be useless. Father Lucy glanced down at his unanswered correspondence. He did not feel that he particularly wanted to keep Mr. Thompson. But he did believe in extorting frankness.

"Well, why shouldn't I?" he inquired urbanely.

Mr. Thompson was silent, obviously considering his next move.

"I don't know," he said at last. "Perhaps you might. Only the question of my mother seemed to me to be the immediate problem."

He looked across again at Father Lucy.

"But if you would accept that," he added slowly, "and I can still be of use to you——"

Father Lucy remained expressionless.

"And what's all this," he continued gently, "about your not taking confessions? Carthew tells me that you have——"

He lifted his eyebrows a little.

"Yes, I'm sorry," said Mr. Thompson, "but I found that I couldn't do it."

"Since when?"

"Since my—my visit to Kilridge."

"But you know that it is our rule here?"

Mr. Thompson bowed.

"Of course," he said, "and there again I'm entirely in your hands."

"You mean, I suppose, as regards continuing here as an assistant priest?"

"Yes," said Mr. Thompson, "it's a little difficult to explain."

Not for the first time Father Lucy wondered at his own toleration of the rather cumbrous diplomacy affected by this melodramatic young man. He looked thoughtfully at his finger-nails.

"Your opinions," he said quietly, "have always been, I think, somewhat—fluid?"

Glancing up again, he perceived that the colour had deepened a little in Mr. Thompson's cheeks.

"You had been very Protestant, for example, if I remember rightly, before you came to us?"

"Yes," said Mr. Thompson, "though that was hardly what I meant."

"And now you are—I take it that at Kilridge they are also rather of that school."

Mr. Thompson stared at him for a moment in genuine surprise.

"Well, yes," he admitted, "very much so, I think."

Only to his equals did Father Lucy allow himself to reveal his deeper feelings. He bent forward, and

picked up a letter from among the others upon his desk.

"You didn't know, perhaps," he inquired, "that I had already heard from Mr. Pratt?"

"No," said Mr. Thompson, "I hope he's quite well again."

Father Lucy looked at him quickly.

"You haven't heard from him yourself?"

"Not a word."

"Nor from anybody?"

"Not about Mr. Pratt."

For the briefest moment, the doubt implied in Father Lucy's gaze might almost have been said to verge upon discourtesy. But he recovered himself instantly, reading the letter through once more. Then his brow cleared and the ready smile shone for the first time upon his lips.

"You must forgive me," he said heartily, "but I had overlooked this postscript. He tells me that, after all, he has deferred writing to you till I reply."

He handed the letter to Mr. Thompson.

"I'm afraid that his complaint," he said, "has turned out to be tubercular."

He waited in silence until Mr. Thompson had thoroughly mastered its contents.

"So, you see," he smiled, "that on the whole you seem rather to have pleased them."

Mr. Thompson, still a little red, handed the letter back in silence.

"And made friends," pursued Father Lucy, "with the lord bishop into the bargain." He leaned back again in his chair. "Upon my word," he said

genially, "you seem to have done yourself pretty well."

He had surrounded himself once more with his usual mellow environment.

"Yes," said Mr. Thompson, "it must seem rather like that."

"And you really," continued Father Lucy, "hadn't *any* idea that poor Pratt was so—had returned in such a delicate state of health?"

"No," said Mr. Thompson, "I'm afraid that I hadn't."

From a rallying humour, through commiseration, Father Lucy's expression changed to one of business-like sympathy with a not unpromising young client.

"Six months in a sanatorium, poor fellow," he said. "Just hand me that Crockford. Let me see: Kilridge, ah, yes, three hundred and fifty gross; nett—two hundred and eighty and a house. Population, four hundred. In the alternate gift of the"—he looked up at Mr. Thompson—"the Simeon trustees and the bishop of the diocese. And I take it that poor Pratt was probably Simeon?"

He closed the book again, and put it on his desk, tapping the cover with his fingers.

"Well," he said, "under the circumstances you might, of course, do worse. You would be curate-in-charge—on your own; and perhaps with prospects. The—er—the ritual would no doubt be more agreeable to your conscience; and your mother would probably be able to make her home with you."

Mr. Thompson rose to his feet.

"Then, in any case," he said soberly, "my mother would be an obstacle to my staying on here?"

Father Lucy, still smiling, shook his head a little sorrowfully.

"Insuperable, I'm afraid," he said. "I mustn't make you an exception, you see."

He held out his hand, with a fine gesture, half of encouragement, half of regret; but it was the final dropping, as they both perceived, of a purely fortuitous relationship—not without a certain relief on the part of Father Lucy, and for Mr. Thompson with an inevitability so smooth and certain that his own share in it seemed by now to have become almost negligible. Even the condition that he had imposed seemed itself to have been determined for him; so much part of him that to have waived it would have been an act of self-maiming.

He opened his window that looked south from the top floor of the Pull-up over those marshalled roofs of little streets into the September dusk.

It was not much after six, but an evening fall of temperature had condensed the moisture of an autumn day into a tawny layer of mist; above which, in the frostier reaches of the sky, a star or two already hung visible.

There was a curious, astringent odour in the air, too—the blown camp-smoke of a new season at the gate. Out in the country dropped leaves would have been in it, and wet stubble; and even here the city had not quite eliminated them. It

brought back again, unexpectedly, a reminiscence of his brief boyhood. It was the smell of a new term—of long evenings, and football; thicker clothes and everybody older and looking different. It meant winter and the stripping off of glamour, and the revealing, instead, of the essential skeleton underneath.

And as he stood there, watching his breath die on the air, he saw quite distinctly that all this would apply to Kilridge. If he went back there it would be no longer to a dreamland. He would neither find again nor bring with him any magic. On the other hand, himself stark and unromantic, he would bring Mummy with her pronunciation and her hair. And from a bond, only strengthened because of it, he saw at once how that would 'place' him; how it would be easier, almost, to take her anywhere else in the world. Yet, even now, he could see her old eyes shining at the very thought of those six months in the country, with her son, and, for the first time in her life, a house that she could call her own.

He turned slowly again towards the darkening room, in which, though it was still unreal to him, he had refrained, with a certain carefulness of temperament, from making any radical alterations. It was the same carefulness that, during these last seven or eight years, had caused him to save up about three hundred pounds—enough, at any rate, from the financial point of view, to rob his next move of any immediate necessity. And it was then, as he bent down to light the fire, that the porter knocked, and against the lit corridor outside

displayed the outline of two apologetic little figures.

II

Just for a moment, in their outdoor clothes and with their faces in shadow, he did not recognise them; and then, as they came hesitatingly into the room, he saw that they were Mr. Pratt and his sister. They shook hands with the peculiar heartiness of country-people who, in a rather bewildering city, have at last happened to meet with an acquaintance.

"We must really apologise," said Mr. Pratt, "for intruding like this. But we found that Father Lucy had just gone out. And it was—it was really about you ~~that~~ we wanted to see him."

Mr. Thompson, pulling forward some chairs, made them sit down, and switched on his reading-lamp.

"Yes, he told me," he said. "I'm so sorry to hear about your trouble."

He looked at them both, and saw it scribbled all over them. He saw that only half of them was watching him, and that the other half never lost sight of something behind him—something not very far off, and that he, too, had once beheld.

"Yes," said Mr. Pratt, "yes. That's why we are up in town. Lennox wants me to go to this new Swiss sanatorium. He knows the man there. It's very cheap, you see, if one can get recommended; only you have to pass a medical referee. We've just been to see him up in Wimpole Street; and I'm glad to say that he seemed favourable."

He glanced at his sister.

"Oh, more than that," said Miss Angela quickly; "he was really quite promising, Mr. Thompson."

"And as we were here, you see," said Mr. Pratt, "as we did happen to be up in London, we thought——"

"It would be such a relief to my brother," put in Miss Angela, "to get the parish off his mind."

They both looked again at Mr. Thompson, conferring upon him, as they did so, an odd and rather pleasant sensation of strength. They had crept close to him, as it were, in a sort of conscious weakness, not cravenly, but because of something that they had apparently perceived in him.

"If you *could*," said Miss Angela.

"But Father Lucy must come first," said her brother. "Of course we recognise that. And besides, dear, there's the matter of the money."

He glanced at Mr. Thompson.

"We couldn't offer, I'm afraid," he continued, "even so much as last time."

"But it would be for six months," said Miss Angela, "and I should do my best to make you comfortable."

"Aren't you going, too, then?" asked Mr. Thompson. But they shook their heads.

"Not to Switzerland," smiled Mr. Pratt.

"There's the journey, you see. And even the cheapest *pension* is more expensive than living at home."

For a moment there flashed before Mr. Thompson the vision of returning to Kilridge not so bereft, after all, of the circumstances of dignity, and with
s

Mummy quite honestly left at an unavoidable distance.

Then he shook his head.

"I ought to have told you," he said, "that I am leaving here because it has become necessary for my mother to live with me."

They glanced quickly at one another before turning to him again.

"You *are* leaving here, anyway?" said Mr. Pratt.

"Oh, Mr. Thompson," said Miss Angela, "if you *could* see your way to coming. We both—we both felt so instantly that you were a friend. You know how one does feel that sometimes."

Mr. Thompson looked at her curiously.

"I'm afraid I don't, you know," he said, "or—or not very well."

Then he smiled a little.

"But what about your churchwarden?" he said. "What about Colonel Lincoln Trent?"

They exchanged looks again before speaking.

"Yes," said Mr. Pratt slowly, "he did talk to me, it's true. But then his ideas, you know, are almost too rigidly—almost Calvinistic. And your friend the bishop told me that as far as—as all that side of the matter went—he was quite sure that I could absolutely trust you."

He blushed a little.

"I mean, of course, that I had never doubted it. But we—I hardly know how to put it. I've never, you see, I'm thankful to say, experienced any of these difficulties myself."

"And after all," said Miss Angela, "it's what you *are* that counts, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Thompson gravely, "I suppose that it is."

She looked at her brother once more inquiringly

"Don't you think, dear," she said, "that we could perhaps manage to have Mrs. Thompson as well? Is she an invalid, Mr. Thompson?"

"But apart from that, my dear," said Mr. Pratt, "there's the money. You keep forgetting that. And I'm afraid—I'm afraid we couldn't offer much more than a guinea a week and hospitality."

For a brief moment, in the stress of this more immediate anxiety, it was only Mr. Thompson, perhaps, who remained conscious of the bigger one behind it.

"Look here," he said at last, "it seems to me that we're all of us at the—at the cross-roads sort of. I only know that I must make a home for my mother; and then—then face the other things. I hardly know, even, if I ought still to be a priest."

He was silent again, seeing that, for all their polite efforts to attend, that thing was in their eyes again before which all three of them were as children. But he held on, labouring his point.

"Well, look here," he said, "that's where I stand. And all I know is that Mummy and I have got to see this thing through together."

He caught the look that flashed between them, and then the grim one with which each faced him.

"Well now, oughtn't you two," he went on, "oughtn't Miss Angela to go along with you out there?"

He saw at once that he had been clumsy; but

at least he had been successful in banishing again, for a moment, the sombre reflection of that Other.

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Pratt quietly, "that's out of the question, for the—the reason that I've already told you."

"But would it be," said Mr. Thompson—"I mean if you would allow me to bring my mother—I couldn't think—we neither of us could think of—of accepting more than the—the honour that you would have done us in offering us your home."

He looked at them both once more, as the new idea took slow root in them; and then, rising, went to his window, and pulled down the blind. When he came back, Miss Angela's handkerchief had disappeared again into her bag; and for the second time this evening the conviction returned to him of having merely subscribed, after all, to something that had already been arranged.

"Then that's settled," he said, "and you have only to let me know the date."

III

Foreseeing, however, when they had gone, that in the bleaker months that had now begun the processes of honesty would be very different to their practice on paper and at a distance, he opened a drawer, and taking a note from it, read it through again.

"Dear Mr. Thompson," it said to him in that singularly young handwriting: "Thank you so much for your kind and very interesting letter. What I did was really nothing. Any other girl would have done the same. But I quite appreciate

what you say about yourself, though I do not hardly understand it. It must be very hard for you. But I am glad that you have let me know all about it. Two heads are better than one, and if I can ever help you again, I will. Yours sincerely, Berenice Chote."

Then he crumpled it up, perceiving finally that it bore no further relation to life, was as nothing to half a syllable of the Pratts' benediction, and less than nothing to one step in the stern quest that lay before him.

Stooping forward a little, he stirred the fire, where presently it flowered for a moment, and died.

"If I hadn't been a silly fool," he said, "that's what I should have done right off"—in which case, as it is only fair, perhaps, to point out, he might possibly not have learnt it by heart.

CHAPTER XXI

I

AND yet to have done so may reasonably be judged, perhaps, to have turned the edge of an awkward moment. He was at any rate glad, a month later, to discover in it a certain reinforcement under superficially embarrassing circumstances. For it appeared that Berenice, having never written to him at all, naturally found the letter's authorship, and no doubt its contents, a matter of some passing interest.

They had met by chance at the foot, almost, of that steep by-way up the hills, traversed by Dick in his Mercédès more than two months before; and the older Berenice, forced into diplomacy by Lily Delmarsh, was leaning back on her walking-stick, and regarding him through the rain.

It was not the first time that he had seen her, for twice already since his return to Kilridge he had caught sight of her in the distance; once early in the morning going cubbing with her brother, and again, late one afternoon, crossing a field-head with Dick—under circumstances that to his ignorance of local conditions had suddenly contrived to associate themselves with prophecy. But only now, ten days after his instalment at the vicarage,

had he actually met her face to face—far more conscious, indeed, of its subtle alteration than of this stupid predicament into which he perceived himself to have floundered. For that was nothing; to be fooled having lost most of its terrors for him. But this other, as it seemed to him, was rather much; and more minutely than either courtesy or the occasion, perhaps, warranted, he found himself studying that new, uneasy armour in her eyes. In her rain-coat and round hat, too, she looked at once taller and more slender; and now she was lifting her eyebrows in a fashion that was strange to him; though scarcely by more, perhaps, than the hair's-breadth between yesterday and to-day.

"Then you didn't keep it?" she inquired.

It was rather a difficult question, though he had seen it coming; and for a moment his glance fell from those transitional grey eyes before him. It saluted the cheeks below them, at once rosy and cold; the firm line of her chin; and then, between them, on the road, the two dandies, Bill's dogs, that she was taking out for exercise. They, too, were observing him, both sitting, as it were, at half-cock, with their drooping top-knots, and wise, brown eyes.

He lifted his own again to their guardian. And though he did not reflect, perhaps, how bitterly, a little while ago, this whole foolish episode would have seemed to compromise him, he was certainly aware, as regarded himself, of a rather refreshing heedlessness.

"No," he said gravely, "but I can repeat it for you if you like."

She appeared to consider this for a moment, and the two dandies shifted their attention to her.

"All right," she said at last. "It's not very awful, I suppose?"

"I don't think so," he replied, and began to recite it to her word for word.

"... 'But I quite appreciate what you say about yourself, though I do not hardly understand it.'"

He interrupted himself with a smile.

"I ought to apologise, I suppose," he said, "for having credited you with the bad grammar."

But her expression had changed a little, and now he saw that she was frowning.

"Is it bad?" she said. "So you had written to me first?"

Mr. Thompson stopped short.

"Why, yes," he said; "why, good lord! you didn't think that I meant——?"

"Well," said Berenice, "that's rather what it sounded like."

"But of course you—you must realise that I could never have meant that?"

Berenice was silent. They were within a week of November, and the rain was blowing cold out of a grey south-west. One of the dandies put his nose down, and began to whine under his breath.

"When exactly did you write?" she asked presently.

He told her the date; and she nodded.

"Yes, I thought so," she said. "That was when I was stayin' at Eastbourne. Little beast—it's Selina, of course. I'm very sorry, Mr. Thompson."

She held out her hand, wet and ungloved, but warm with walking.

"No, it's I who should be sorry," he said, "for what must still seem to you almost unpardonable."

It has already been indicated more than once that Berenice's thought-processes were leisurely. And now, after a fashion that suddenly recalled her to him as he had first known her, she neither troubled herself to hasten them nor to remove her gaze from his countenance. Then she put down one of the dandies that had begun to paw her skirt.

"Oh, no," she said at last, "that's all right. There's nothin' in that."

Then this earlier Berenice began to scrutinize him once more.

"How long are you stayin' here?" she asked.

"About six months," he said.

"There was nothin', I suppose—nothin' very important in your letter?"

To the instructed stranger of a minute ago he would have replied promptly in the negative; and even now he rather hesitated before he answered her.

"I only wanted," he said, "to thank you again for what you had done for me; and to—to try and explain a little that it was rather more, perhaps, than either of us thought."

He noticed then that the armour had crept once more into her eyes, but that, after glancing up the road, she still remained where she was.

"How do you mean?" she said slowly.

"I mean that besides saving me from death, you gave me a chance of—of readjusting my ideas."

It seemed an uncomfortable topic for an October

downpour. It smacked, indeed—it might even have been an outcome—of those never quite banished pronouncements, Absolution, Remission and the World without End. The two dandies were at half-cock again, staring patiently in front of them.

“Was that the important thing?” Berenice asked.

“The only one, I think,” said Mr. Thompson.

She regarded him warily, like a fencer; and yet, perhaps, not wholly so. For now, with an abrupt and rather sickening conviction, he seemed to discover in her, lingering there still, a faint remnant of that Sunday. He was not so stripped as he had supposed. There were still a leaf or two clinging to him.

“I wanted to make ~~to~~,” he said, “quite clear to you that both as a priest and a man I had been a fraud. I had merely lived to make other people think me able; and not only able but holy. I had tried to make you think the same. But I was not. I was nothing at all. I wanted to make you understand that.”

“But why?”

“Because I thought that I owed it to you.”

“For pullin’ you out of the water?”

“Partly, and because partly I was rather afraid that I had succeeded in—in deceiving you a little about the other thing.”

Very slowly again he saw rising up into her eyes not only that less guarded Berenice but a new flame of which he had hardly suspected her. It scorched him, but he stood his ground.

“Oh,” she said, “and what made you think that?”

It was the last time that he ever saw her as a girl.

"Your eyes," he said steadily, "when you looked at me."

II

Miss Sary, in her wet mackintosh, stopped short.

"Hullo," she said, "what's the matter with you?"

Berenice looked her up and down much as she had surveyed Mr. Thompson—a dot now in the distance upon parochial business.

"Well," said Miss Sary, "spit it out, my dear. Has he been rude?"

The two dandies sat them down again with little grunts upon the road.

"I don't quite see," said Berenice, "what that's got to do with you."

"Why, nothing," said Miss Sary mildly, "hence my womanly curiosity."

"Well, he has," said Berenice, "damned rude—if you want to know."

III

Damned rude—there were no other words for it; and as she swung homewards through the rain she told herself more than once that she wished to goodness she had let him drown—or had not been swimming out there herself—or had never gone to church to hear him preach. For there, when she came to think of it, lay her real charge against the man. It was there that this thing had happened to her—been added or taken away—of whose mysterious addition or loss she had been more or less conscious ever since.

Neither, as far as she could see, had this confession made much difference to it. For here it was again still poisoning her life—a life that she had never asked to be changed—with its unexpected and penetrating discomfort; its affirmations, vague and disturbing; its accusations; its serene persistence. It was like a pebble, not always felt, but unremovable in every pair of her shoes. It was like the touch of an invisible bramble at every gap that she had hitherto leapt unhindered.

And it was more. It assumed a philosophy within her that she neither possessed nor desired. It suggested criticisms that, by their very presence, made her feel at once lonely and conceited. For if Windy had been good enough for her father and Bill, why shouldn't it be good enough for her?

A change of wind drove the rain into her face, and she pulled down her hat-brim as she strode along. Those superior people, too, who would not call upon them, they were only different in degree, surely, and not in kind—too thin-blooded to live their own lives; or not honest enough to do so in the daylight. And after all, who in the world were they anyway? For there had been Chotes, she supposed, at Windy, when they were bag-men, the whole lot of them; while as for their women-folk, she would like to run them through the sieve of that two-mile swim round Wingbarrow Nob.

And yet all that, again, was really apart from the question, as much apart from it as Mr. Thompson himself; whom she had certainly taken, thanks to his damnable good acting, as something different

from the ordinary run of men—but whose admission of fraud had only transferred the phenomenon to another and less tangible basis. While here, to complete her annoyance, were the Rev^d. Algernon and Mrs. Cossington.

She tried to walk past them with no more than a nod, but was outmanœuvred by an extended front.

"No, you'd better not shake hands with me," she said, "my gloves are sure to be doggy."

Mr. Cossington poked the dandie-bitch with his umbrella.

"Good little man," he said, "good little chap," and Berenice reflected that he too was a clergyman.

"We've just been to call," said his wife, "on Mr. Thompson."

"Oh, indeed."

Mrs. Cossington noted the tone, and adapted herself.

"He was out, but oh, my dear—his mother!"

Her husband glanced at her with a deprecating expression.

"But perhaps Miss Chote," he said, "was not yet aware that Mr. Thompson had brought his mother down with him."

"I didn't even know," said Berenice, "till just now, that Mr. Thompson had come down himself."

"But oh, my dear," repeated Mrs. Cossington, "his poor mother! You remember telling me that you didn't think he was a gentleman. Well, you were quite right, my dear. You have only to glance at his mother."

"A nice woman, no doubt," interjected her

husband, "a very well-meaning body—but a pity in a place like Kilridge."

"Poor thing, yes—one's so afraid she'll feel *outrée*."

A natural sympathy with a sad error of judgment, a Christian kindness to all less happily-born brethren, and the true tact of an English gentleman were equally implicit in Mr. Cossington's smile.

"We thought, perhaps," he said, "that you ought to be told this before you—er—in case you had been meaning to call."

"Well, I hadn't," said Berenice briefly. "I never pay calls upon anybody."

Then she bade them good-bye, hastening on through the village, lest because she was particularly anxious to arrive at Windy than to replace herself once more, if possible, in at any rate a comparative liberty.

For although the Cossingtons, as such, were quite negligible, it had only needed them to press home to her very skin this sense of invasion so suddenly active again about her—first realised, perhaps, in that half-hour on Beachy Head, but never before quite so stiflingly near. For now it lay like a cordon scarcely a stride's length about her. It was already, indeed, in spite of her stout protestations, trying to isolate her even from Windy itself, as though from her too, as from the prophet's servant of old, something intimate were being painfully torn—to reveal a world thronging her, whether she would or not; but not merely, alas, with armies of light.

CHAPTER XXII

I

LONG afterwards—if not in time, perhaps, at least in experience—it was to become a sort of consolation to Berenice that she had done what she did on her own. There was nobody, at any rate, looking back, who could be held particularly guilty—or without a loss of self-respect that she was not prepared to suffer.

And yet for us, her more detached if reluctant historians, even from the beginning, from that first moment of her re-entrance into Windy, there would seem vaguely to have been evidences of this new presence in its midst—or less new, perhaps, than the sudden flowering of some age-old growth; or, again, the pull-back of some natural tide from those shivery fastnesses behind her.

Even to herself, indeed, entering carelessly, there was that curious arrest of which she felt conscious—as though somebody, in her absence, had been rearranging the furniture; as though something familiar, but hitherto regarded as quite insignificant, had been deliberately thrust forward into prominence. And yet again all this must be admitted to have been so fleeting that long before Bill had shouted out to her his welcome, it had

been replaced in her mind by a quite different train of sentiments.

He was already loud in conversation when he broke short, and turned his face to her.

"Eh what?" he cried, "get your things off, and come tobogannin', B."

They had just landed, himself and Mrs. Freddy, at the bottom of the broad staircase, and now, clanging across the hall, he bowled the tea-tray at her between Freddy Cotterell and another girl—a slender girl, whom she did not know, but who had turned gently, and was examining her with self-possession. They had all evidently not long arrived, their motor furs, dark and glistening, lying in little heaps on various chairs—costly furs that struck an unwonted note of luxury, but rather a warm one after so chill a pilgrimage. Drinking some tea, too, at a table near the fire, stood Dick Bolton, who lifted his cup when he saw her; while in mid-career, bumping from stair to stair, came Selina, her legs wide and hair flying.

Except for Dick and the second girl, they were all rather flushed, partly owing, no doubt, to their long drive through the rain, and partly from the tray-sliding that had followed it. Bill especially, she saw, whose birthday was being celebrated, was curiously excited, his light eyes shining, and his broad cheeks, burnt and rosy, glowing like table-legs in the firelight. It was on his initiative, indeed, that the Cotterells, wealthy piano-makers from Canchester, had been invited here to-night, he himself having driven over in the morning to fetch them and their luggage in the car.

But it was their guest rather than themselves that had suddenly caught her attention, though less by virtue of any attraction of physique or feature than from an odd sense of having been somehow placed by her at a humiliating disadvantage—as if she had been surprised, almost, in an attitude of unconscious indecency. It was purely momentary. It was of course, absurd. But it made her feel hot and a little unnatural, as she went up to her without waiting to be introduced.

“I don’t think I know you,” she said, holding out her hand.

The girl blinked rapidly—it seemed to be a sort of trick of hers—but across eyes that remained perfectly composed.

“Selma Reid,” she said. “I suppose you’re Berenice.”

She might almost have been the mistress of the house.

Bill came up between them, panting, and wiping his forehead.

“Selma Reid,” he repeated, “commonly known as Sis.”

She smiled faintly at him, still regarding Berenice, who backed away a step, letting go her hand.

“Been tobogannin’?” she asked; but the girl shook her head as Mrs. Freddy, fanning herself vigorously, now joined them. She was a youngish woman spoilt by her teeth, but very talkative.

“Not Sissy,” she cried; “she’s much too discreet.”

And that described her, perhaps, better than

anything else. She was as discreet as a smoking-room suddenly entered by a woman. Then Berenice turning abruptly, encountered Dick with his half-smile, and Selina beyond him with observant eyes.

"Look here," she said, "I want to talk to you, Selina."

But Dick broke in with his leisurely, normal voice.

"You're not going to jump on her—to-night?" he laughed.

"I don't know," said Berenice; "why shouldn't I?"

He glanced away from her to the group behind her, and then back again. He might almost, in his own adequate fashion, have been answering two questions at once.

"Oh, I shouldn't worry," he said quietly; "what's the good?"

And certainly it didn't seem likely to produce any, for Selina was both distraught and excited; while Mr. Thompson and most of the things that appertained to him had suddenly been pushed back again into an incongruous background. But the tobogganning had collapsed as everybody lit cigarettes, and she accompanied Berenice rather sullenly to the landing.

"What do you mean," said Berenice, "by openin' my letters?"

Down below them in the hall somebody was apparently telling a story—one of the women, since the three men could all be heard laughing. Selina coloured up a little.

"Oh, that," she said, "that's ever so long ago. I'm sorry. But I haven't torn it up."

"Go and get it then," said Berenice; "get it at once."

Selina looked at her askance, and then disappeared up the stairs, whence presently it came fluttering down to Berenice's feet.

"There's your old letter," she said, leaning over the banisters. "Why do you look like that? What are you going to do to me?"

But Berenice picked it up, turning away to her own room.

"Nothin' at all," she said; "I wouldn't touch you with a barge-pole."

II

They had lit a fire for her, and still clad in her outdoor things she sat down in her chair, and read it through before destroying it.

"Dear Miss Chote," he had written—it was much what he had been saying to her—"I had hoped to see you again before leaving Kilridge. But your going away made it, of course, impossible; and no words can properly express my thanks for what you gave me on that Saturday night. But though I was near death then I was closer still to something else; to the edge of everything, as it seemed to me—and as it seems to me still. It's hard to make clear exactly what I want to tell you. But I should like you to know it, because, in a sense, I have deceived you. I have baptised and buried people, and, worse still, have preached to them, on no other foundation than a

desire for self-advancement. I was probably more ignorant, that is to say, than any person who ever listened to me, and upon whom I was trying to climb into an important position. And now the position—even the people and myself—seem equally to have been thrown out of focus for me. You will find it difficult, I'm afraid, to understand what I mean. But please accept this not as an impertinence, but as a fact. What you gave me was Time, if nothing more than that. Yours very sincerely, Albert Thompson."

Then one of the maids came into the room with her hot water, lighting the candles for her, and pulling down the blinds. She was the type of servant that was always coming and going through the house, the daughter of a small innkeeper at Duckmouth, highly paid, briskly courted, but in no hurry to be married; and would Miss Berenice, please, need any help to-night with her dress? But Berenice shook her head, and when the maid had gone, tore up the letter, and threw its pieces into the fire.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, "if he wasn't rude, he was beastly——" But why bother to find the right word? There was no other man, at any rate, who would have talked to her like that. Then she rose from her chair and went across to the looking-glass, taking off her hat while she stared into her eyes.

"Damn it all, I feel rotten," she said, and began slowly to change for dinner.

III

It was nearly an hour later when Bill came into her room from his own that was just opposite, across the corridor. He was in his shirt-sleeves, recently shaved, and very pink, holding his chin up above a rather mangled tie.

"You might do this up for me, old girl," he said. "Well, what do you think of her, eh? Isn't she a ripper?"

The words—so spoken—suddenly flashed upon yet another yawn in her foundations. She fixed her gaze upon the task in hand.

"Who do you mean?" she said. "Hold your chin up higher."

"Why, Sissy, of course, Sissy Reid, eh what?"

She stepped back a little, examining the poise of the bow. Considering the raw material it might quite possibly have been worse. She met his eyes for a moment. He had obviously no doubts.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, "I suppose she's all right."

"You bet she is," said Bill. "She's a winner."

"Who's that?" said Dick at the open door. "May I come in?"

It was the first night that he had actually stayed here.

"What a jolly room. Who's your winner, Bill, eh?"

"Why, Miss Reid," said Bill, "that girl with the Cotterells."

"Who is she?"

"Oh, I don't know. She's a pal of theirs. Her brother's on the Stock Exchange."

He crossed the passage as Berenice came to the doorway, and went to his room to brush his hair and find his coat.

"But you don't like her very much?" said Dick.

It was like the reminder, infinitely gently offered, of a pre-existing, defensive alliance. It suggested, at any rate, that to Dick, with his larger interests, this girl was a mere incident of the evening; that Berenice mustn't take her quite so seriously; and that she was really not half a bad sort.

She slipped back into her room, and, after an old habit upon leaving it, pulled up the blind, and opened the window a little wider. The driven rain was now falling quite straight, as though by measure from an inexhaustible cistern. She blew out the candles, and the brighter corridor received her. Just for a moment they stood alone there, and he let her search his eyes. He let them be Windy for her, if she would, and her cloak against phantoms. If she misunderstood them—well, to-morrow she would very easily outgrow that; and for to-night, at least, they were entirely at her service. He smiled down a little at the artlessness that was still so apparent to him—the uncompromising contrast between her tanned neck and white bosom; her rather hobble-de-hoy frock, and direct, prejudiced eyes. He decided once again that she was not at her best in evening dress, but he touched her frock with his fingers as they turned together down the corridor.

"What's it made of?" he inquired. "It rather suits you, you know."

"No, it doesn't," she said truly; "it's a silly frock, and I hate it."

A gust of laughter from the Cotterells ran upstairs towards the landing.

"But you're feeling better now?"

She looked at him quickly; and he saw that he had become closer to her and more important.

He touched her lips.

"First for a week," he said.

IV

It would have been hard to realise then that all the way from County Cork to Brest, each insulated by darkness and this same forest of rain, groups of souls just as vivid chattered round lamplit tables, eyed one another, and thought thoughts above melting time. It would have been hard to realise, even, that no further than three brief miles away an immortal Cossington was passing the mustard to an immortal Cossington, wondering softly, as he did so, who was to be Banner's next vicar; or that a harassed gentleman in Canchester was writing an urgent letter to Dick Bolton; or that Mummy had put on a bit of lace for her son to notice and admire; or that, shrouded by its hills, in its rather remote austerity, the life of Creel was no doubt flowing in its accustomed channels.

It was certainly difficult for a healthy and quite normal young woman, naturally cheered by the first offerings of a very well-cooked dinner, to believe that but three hours ago, in a twilight

sunk for ever, she had been face to face with a Mr. Thompson and the dim alchemies that he had denied—Power, and Commandment, and Everlasting Life; or that only just now, upstairs in her bedroom, it had seemed to be crumbling beneath her feet, this very Windy where she sat, with Bill's red face at her left hand.

For now who so close to her, with all, surely, that she was hungry for; unperturbed; asking no questions; and lifting its old cup to her lips?—and yet not—not just for a moment, perhaps—with quite all its usual frankness. But then, when she came to think of it, had she any right to expect this? For once doubted, as she had been doubting it, and even the easiest circle must close a little—will have woven new bonds, in the interval, howsoever softly exclusive; may even—she glanced at Selma—have definitely promoted some one else.

Then the moment passed; and here they all were again, her own people grown warm about her—the good comrades who had readmitted her, and laughed away her spectres. She lent her smiles—she could not help it—to Selma's infectious, drawling comments. She saw Dick's eyes before her own like dark lanes tempting her to trespass.

V

Far enough away now, almost out of sight indeed, crouched those vagrant importunities; or skulked remote, like ghostly jackals, round some periphery of her being. And she began to under-

stand, sipping her wine, how important it was for her to give and take—how quite easy, too, with an unexpected and rather thrilling sort of ease. That was what Dick, indeed, had been trying to tell her. That was what life was—she ought to have known it—just as people gather about a fire to keep the common foe at bay.

She glanced at Selma again, examining her more closely—the quiet pose of her head and neck; her curious habit of blinking her eyelids; and her cleverly-sustained, provocative modesty. In all that she said, too—her quaint, short words—there was that constant hint of funded knowledge. She was brainy; and that was the reason, no doubt, why Berenice had misjudged her.

“For that’s the worst of you Chote sort,” as Lily Delmarsh had once assured her; “you always jib at anybody clever like a young horse shying at an engine;” and indeed it was of Lily Delmarsh that this new girl rather reminded her; and yet, less of Lily Delmarsh than, for some odd reason, of Lollie Jameson.

For though she was brainy, she never pursued you, as was the custom of Lily; and yet, on the other hand, you never perceived that she was in the least immoral—or at any rate in the simple sense of Lollie Jameson and her companions. On the contrary, everything she said was so like the quick dropping of a skirt that it was really Windy, every time, whose sense of decency was being rebuked—and yet so deftly that to offend again was becoming really rather exciting.

She leaned back again in her chair, listening to

Bill—watching him, too, with his newly-eager, slightly-bulging eyes, his clipped moustache, and obvious anxiety to shine. Then she laughed aloud, conscious within her of this new impulse of adventure; and very well pleased, he turned his face to her, all the other faces following suit, jolly red faces, the faces of pals. She became magnanimous then, seeing that of them all Sissy Reid's was the only pale one—so fragile, almost, that she could have laughed again at her own untutored hostility.

Then Freddy Cotterell, leaning across the table, gave them a toast, and cried, "Our hostess"; and over their glasses the girls' eyes met again, body and brain doing mutual homage, but with brain, perhaps, as was only ~~met~~ taking the last, graceful lead.

'Sister mine,' it said, 'I may be clever—but how delicious to be strong like you.' . . .

And then Bill's health must be drunk in the port, and not till then did Selma begin to tell them, syllable by slow syllable, the opening phases of her first story—a story so dull, indeed, and at the outset so apparently aimless that but for her curious art, and in spite of their good-fellowship, she would have had them all yawning and fidgeting with their glasses. And yet *was* it dull? For now, delicately, and with an almost mesmeric dexterity, behold them all shepherded, one by one, past each critical brink—past each moment when it was just toppling into the abyss of failure—until at last, in all the world, there

would seem to be nothing else in motion but those two lips across the table and the flickering eyelids above them.

Even Dick, indeed, lounging back, and far less interested in Selma than in the development of what seemed to him a rather piquant situation, shifted across a little in his chair, and gave her a new attention. And then, quite abruptly, she stopped short, and opened her eyes rather wide.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said; "I forgot."

Just for a second it might have been part of the story.

Then Bill said to her,

"What d'you mean?"

She pointed across at Selina; and they followed her finger reluctantly. But Selina bent forward with shining eyes.

"Oh, that's all right, that's all right," she said quickly; "I know everything, don't I, Barker?"

She looked at Berenice with a bright spot in either cheek; but Bill, rising awkwardly, pushed his chair back from the table.

"Send her to bed," he said. "Let's go to the billiard-room. Bring the smokes, Dick. Send the kid to bed."

Still under the spell of it, they moved in silence down the lamplit passage, where Selma shuddered a little, and Berenice saw that a lattice-window had been left open—a narrow oblong of darkness, with its sill wet. She stopped for a moment, and made it fast; and it was out beyond it, and about this hour, that Mr. Thompson had just made to himself a definite admission.

"That young lady," said Mummy, "do you think she'll come and call on me?"

He looked at her sharply.

"What young lady do you mean?"

Clumsy Mummy—— "Why the one, dear, that—that saved your life."

"I don't think that it's very likely," he said.
"After all, why should she?" . . .

They dropped into chairs round the billiard-room fire.

"I hope nobody will be shocked," said Sissy.

"Good lord no! What is it?"

"Let me see—where had I got to?"

"Legs," said Freddy Cotterell, "the young party's legs."

"Oh yes, well——"

Two sentences finished it. They met her eyes, and then each other's, and drew closer.

"Don't let's play billiards," she said. "It's a silly game. Let's stop here."

VI

Presently they said to her,

"But you haven't got them here with you?"

"Yes, I have," she said.

"Let's get 'em down."

"No, you shan't."

"Won't I, by George?"

Bill scrambled to his feet.

She held his coat-sleeve.

"You couldn't find them."

"Yes, I could."

"Well, you shan't see them then. It wouldn't be good for you. You're too young."

"Young be damned. What d'you say, Freddy? Shall we make a sprint for 'em?"

He turned to Mrs. Cotterell.

"What d'you say, Beatie? Shall we dig 'em out, eh what?"

She shrugged her shoulders, showing her teeth.

"Oh, I've seen 'em."

"You little devil. I'll just bet you have, eh what, B?"

"Oh, I don't care," said Berenice; "I've probably seen 'em too."

"Not these," said Sissy; "they're the latest. They're really rather chic."

Bill began tugging again.

"Have a drink," said Dick. "Make him sit down, Freddy."

Mrs. Cotterell rose.

"Well, I'm off," she yawned; "I'm dead to the world. I was out cubbin' before breakfast."

Half an hour later, however, she had sufficiently recovered to be sitting wideawake by Selma's fire, the three of them undressed, warming their feet there, and sharing a box of chocolates. Selma's photos had been passed round, and now lay on the rug between their slippers; and it was then that Selina, panting, and in her nightgown, broke into the bedroom with a run.

"Hallo, I say, they're after me. I got 'em beautifully. I got 'em all."

She pounced upon the pictures before Selma could snatch them. She stood looking at the top

one—a little white—but trying to smile. Then Bill pounded down the passage, with his hair dripping and coat discarded.

"You little devil," he spluttered, grinning. Freddy and Dick massed up behind him.

She tried to become a child again, catching at a pillow, and hurling herself fiercely into their midst. There leapt from her brain, too, as she did so, and into the brains of all these others, the sudden realisation of where they were—of strength, desire, and isolation. For this moment—who could stop them?—between a day and a day they might run free. Opportunity laughed at them. Hands gripped arms. White feet dodged, and slipped aside. They struggled out of the room, and up and down the corridor. They collapsed at last upon the landing, breathless, choking, sprawling on the settee. Even Selma was visibly ruffled, fanning herself vigorously with Bill's handkerchief. In her nightgown and black stockings she looked extraordinarily young and slender. . . .

And then quite suddenly, as though all the evening it had only been cracking its slow way through, this new creature—this bright, winged thing—slipped its cocoon, and ran declared. Everything else then was only an accident. Eyes met eyes, naked and undenied. Even Selina, half at a loss, reddened abruptly, shifting from foot to foot. Then Freddy Cotterell whispered something, and headed impetuously for Selma's bedroom.

"It's those photos," she cried, and ran after him, with Bill in her wake and Beatie Cotterell.

Selina still hesitated on the landing. The servants had long ago put out the lights.

"Get to bed," said Berenice.

"What about yourself?"

"I'm goin' too."

"No, you're not."

She ran to her own door, Selina following her with Dick.

"Yes, I am."

She pushed the door open, crossing the room, and stirring the fire.

Selina lingered on the mat, masking soft movements behind her.

"I'll bet you're not," she said again, "I'll bet you're not going to bed."

Then she slid out as Berenice came for her, running into the arms of Dick.

"All right then."

She wound herself round him, and pushed him inside, slamming the door. She turned the key.

"What about that?" she cried, and ran with a thumping heart into Selma's room.

"I've locked them in," she said. "Take the key."

The four people there laughed, and exchanged glances.

"Damn the kid!" said Dick. "I'll have to break it."

He stared angrily about the room.

"What about the window?"

"Oh, it can be done," said Berenice, "I've often done it in my youth."

He turned to her quickly, flushed and laughing, with her bare feet and disordered hair.

"By God, though, I'll come back," he said, "but we can't stop here like this."

It was a broad sill with a drain-pipe running down between their windows. He climbed out, and left her alone there; and she knew in that moment what she would do.

It is because of that moment, indeed, that you cannot be asked to pardon her.

Then she heard him come back again and set her free.

"Little brute," he said. "They'd given it to Selma. They've sent her upstairs to bed."

The house was quite dark now; and a long way off they heard a door shut, and then another. He locked his own, and kept the key. She heard herself speak to him

"Aren't you going to bed?"

"Not till I've kissed you."

"What about Bill?"

He looked at her curiously.

"He's all right."

Then he crushed her against him, covering her face with kisses.

"You darling—you sweet darling," he said. . .

VII

There was no colour in her now anywhere; and he said to her presently—

"You must marry me."

Only in the texture of her brow and cheeks could he be conscious of those long summers. . .

The room grew chilly.

"Damn the girl—she's going to cry."

CHAPTER XXIII

I

It becomes a sorrowful task then to record, in that growing light—with yesterday's jungle melted and the world creeping again about the house—that Berenice presented to the heir of Creel a poor enough return for his capital.

For you saw now, with her cheeks pale and her eyes blurred (though not with tears) how much of what had passed for her beauty fled away with her colour. You saw how little there was else—a face stricken and mature. You saw a cold thing staring at a colder.

There was that last kiss, too—a thing of horror—and the thief-like stealing down the passage. There were the cold sheets that must be crumpled for propriety's sake next morning. There were two hours of cigarette-smoking and long staring at the ceiling. There was the shaving of a damned fool in to-morrow's looking-glass. And, finally, there were the letters from Stack, with the Canchester gentleman's among them, announcing old Spencer's resignation and the probable date of the by-election.

Very clearly then, in the virtuous hour before and during breakfast, Dick perceived just how

deeply and disastrously he had committed himself—so deeply and disastrously that, knowing himself for the very efficient person that he was, it was obvious that not he alone could be held responsible. He nodded curtly to Freddy Cotterell, foraging for his wife upstairs, both persons who might easily presume, he thought, on an accidental intimacy, and the sponsors, too, as he now reflected, of that poisonous little animal Selma Reid.

He damned the three of them under his breath, and the whole ménage that had made them possible—the absentee Sir George, and his unlicked cub of an heir. He stared balefully round the room across the coffee and bacon—the room from which he was to take his wife, though, by God, nothing else. And so, for the hundredth time, he came back again to Berenice, not as he had seen her on horse or headland, or even last night with dancing eyes, but at five in the morning, creased and pallid, and with his own signature written across her.

And yet she was no adventuress. He knew that without any doubt. She had not contributed, even—except possibly by a certain indolence of temperament—to the system that had produced her. That was the devil of it, indeed. That was why he must marry her. That was why it was the only possible thing to do.

He stared down at his correspondence, brooding over the new situation. He saw the ghostly eyebrows of his world lifted gently on all sides; and then, banishing them from him, he saw the demands of the immediate, political moment;

although as far as that went—as far as that went——

He leaned back in his chair, frowning at the opposite wall, and tapping thoughtfully with his fingers upon the edge of the table; and then, shifting his eyes a little, he saw Berenice, framed in the doorway, bathed and cool, and carrying something in her arms. He saw, too, that she had either breakfasted or been out of doors before this, for though her head was bare, she had slipped on a brown, knitted coat, and the rain was still sparkling on her hair and cheeks. He saw that the colour had returned to them, and that she was regarding him so quietly that any prospect of a scene sank, with relief, from his mind. It was difficult to realise, indeed, that she could be the same person whom he had left four hours ago; or that, at any rate, was the effect, he felt, that she intended to produce on him.

“Good-mornin’,” she said. “I’ve been out to the kennels. I think it’s goin’ to clear up.”

He knew that last week her favourite Bedlington had pupped; and she held now in her hands one of its sleek-furred little offspring. She looked at him gravely above it, like some older relation of herself. She was like a house re-tenanted by some very practical caretaker.

He pushed back his chair from the table, and pulled out his cigarette-case.

“—Or is anybody else coming down?” he asked. She shook her head.

“I don’t know,” she said, “but it doesn’t matter.”

Still watching her, he struck a match, as she sauntered across to the window, where she dropped down into a chair, rolling the puppy in her lap. Then he rose from the table, and, passing her chair, stood for a moment looking out, his hands in his pockets and his eyes surveying the country—the wet lawn and paddock, and grey slope of the downs. He saw that probably she was right, too, and that the weather would presently mend, the clouds blowing thinner in the upper air, with patches of blue showing through.

Then he turned about, looking down at her as she played with the dog in her lap. And while, in a sense, she had, no doubt, lessened his task a good deal, it was devilish hard, all the same, to know how best to approach her. He took his cigarette from his mouth.

"Well, look here, B," he said, "I suppose we'd better let 'em know. I'd better write to your father at once."

"What about?" she said.

"Why, our engagement."

"Are we engaged?"

"Well, naturally. At least, I suppose so. Aren't we?"

She examined him steadily with her grey eyes; and for half a second there flashed across him, somewhere deep down in his being, the consciousness that as a wife she might not be so unworthy after all.

"At the same time," he said, "it's rather the deuce, but look here——" and with a frank gesture, he handed her the letter from the Conservative agent at Canchester.

She read it through, and at that moment Bill came in, dressed for riding. He glanced across at them, pouring himself out some tea, and nibbling a piece of toast.

"Hullo," he said, "you down? I've got a devil of a head on me."

He swallowed his breakfast, and clattered out, and Berenice looked up again at Dick.

"I don't know what you think," he said, "but perhaps it would be better just to lie low till all this business is over. I mean, it'll be rather piling it on, won't it? Or what do you think?"

She handed him back the letter.

"I don't think," she said, "that I shall ever want to see you again."

There was a moment's silence while his eyes darkened a little, although she had made her statement much as she might have told him her address or her father's name—with a simplicity that took him frankly by surprise. He stared down at her, with his lips parted, and his cigarette smouldering between his fingers.

"Well——" she said, "do you want to see *me*?"—and she might almost have been surveying herself from the front garden, as it were, genuinely surprised that he should still take any interest in her—pretty sure, indeed, that as a matter of fact, he didn't.

The whole situation, in fact, vaguely reminded him of some play that he had once seen acted. It was hard to believe that they were two living people discussing something rather vital. Or was it vital? He glanced at her keenly. Perhaps it

wasn't. Perhaps he had misjudged her. Perhaps he had exaggerated.

"Well, good lord," he said at last, "that's talking pretty straight."

She was still fondling the little Bedlington; still regarding him above it.

"But do you?" she repeated. "Do you really want to see me?"

"My dear girl—I thought that we were engaged to be married."

"Only you don't want it announced?"

"Well, I only thought—in view of all the tub-thumping and so on."

"But you—you do love me?"

"Well, surely," he said, "after last night——"

"That's what I mean," she nodded, "after last night?"

"Look here," he said sharply, "what's come over you, Berenice?"

She considered for a moment, looking beyond him to the open country.

"I don't know," she said, "I couldn't tell you."

"Then why," he said, "why can't you be honest with me?"

She brought her eyes back to his face.

"Haven't I been?"

"Well, what are you driving at?"

"I want you to be honest with me. At least, I don't know. I don't suppose that I really care very much."

He definitely coloured now. She had, at any rate, no right to talk to him like that.

"You seem to forget," he said, "that I'm

proposing to marry you how, when, and where you like."

"No, I don't," she said, "I only want to know whether if I——" she nodded towards the window, "if I vanished into thin air you'd be sorry or rather glad?"

"Don't talk nonsense."

"You'd be sorry then?"

Her eyes compelled him. He was silent.

"You'd be glad?"

Then she nodded, without rancour, but as if he had answered her in the affirmative.

"So should I," she said, "so should we both."

She lifted the puppy again from her lap, rubbing it softly against her cheek. He opened the window, and threw the cigarette out, and took the opposite chair.

"Well, look here," he said slowly, "we've both made pretty damned fools of ourselves. We'll admit that. At least, I will. And you don't want to see me any more?"

She nodded. He pulled his chair up.

"But don't you see," he said, "that you've rather committed yourself? Why didn't you think of that before?"

"Why didn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know. What man does? We're not the only ones, you know."

"So I suppose."

"Then you won't marry me?"

She shook her head.

He looked at her thoughtfully. It seemed impossible, almost, that she could quite be realising

what she did. Then a sudden movement of her—some soft gesture with that small thing in her arms—sent him bending towards her again.

"Look here," he began, "have you thought——?"

But she interrupted him.

"Yes, I've thought about that."

"And in that case?"

"I should have to, I suppose, for the sake of——"

There was a moment's pause.

"It's not likely, of course."

"No," she said, "I suppose not."

And then there broke over him, as he looked at her, a sudden wave of prevision; from which his mind ran back over the long hours of last night. For why shouldn't it be likely? It *was* likely. Nay, he believed that it had happened. He saw her horribly—a frail bark, flying his colours, launched by himself—and himself corroded with the secret knowledge of the leak that was going to sink her. For a moment he plumbed tender-nesses of which he had not hitherto suspected himself; and yet even now, when he touched her, for the first time genuinely anxious, it was to find her so remote from him that he recoiled from her almost startled. It was as though his fingers had touched a dead thing over which she was merely keeping watch. Then he rose abruptly to his feet, turning away from her into the room.

"All right," he said, "do as you like. Only for God's sake let me know."

"I suppose," said Berenice, "you couldn't tell me Who God is?"

II

So you may see her there, if you will look, before the world closes again about her, not as conscious, perhaps, as she ought to be, of the visible mercy that you have exercised—hardly conscious, indeed, of anything but a somewhat unusual fatigue, and the utter fatuity, after what had happened, of being anything else but honest.

For though there had been a moment—or an age, perhaps—of a rather dreadful nausea, it had so far left her that now nothing remained of it but this odd feeling of divorce; as though her body were but a machine, with herself its necessary warder.

That was why, too, though, no doubt, lots of girls would have laughed at her, she would quite frankly own up to the effect that it had had upon her: but why, on the other hand, when very possibly she ought to have been throbbing all over, she could not claim even to be suffering from a headache.

Then Selina came into the room, heavy-eyed and silent—lucky Selina, if she did but know it, who was not yet grown up; and after Selina, the usual incidents of the usual autumn day, the arranging of meals with the housekeeper, the forwarding of letters to her father, the restoration of the puppy to the warm nipples of its mother, the letting loose of the dandies for their sober, short-legged canter, and the kneeling down in the clean straw to select a couple of them for a walk.

They stood, balancing themselves against her, offering pink tongues to do her homage; and she

wondered, as she looked down into them, what their deep eyes saw—yesterday's girl or to-day's woman who would never be a girl any more ?—or just an animal like themselves with a nimbler brain and larger muscles ?

“Do *you* know Who God is,” she smiled, “or don't you bother about such things ?”—and then wondered again why she should have asked them such a thing.

CHAPTER XXIV

I

FOR from now onwards—since the story of one person cannot long remain less than that of two—you are to behold dawning in Berenice, even as in Mr. Thompson before her, the slow conviction that this question must be faced; that it could no longer be evaded or ignored; that it uprose, stark, down every possible vista; and that it was as inseparable from her being as this new life that she feared within her—her own and yet not her own, growing daily towards fruition.

In some odd way, too, as it seemed to her, they were intertwined, they had become one; or it was as one, at any rate, that she must now fight them both—at first warily, through a mellow November, trusting to the usual to deliver her; and then fiercely, with the mænad in her suddenly aroused and taking charge.

Thus lawless desires would spring up in her towards herself and towards Dick. She would magnify him, in fierce moments, into a monster straddling across her life. And then in the next, since this wounded her pride, she would compress him down again into a toy, deliberately chosen by her to play with, and only discovered too late to have been malignant. She heard with a grim

satisfaction of his defeat at the polls. She learned that he had gone abroad for a while to recruit his energies; and she wished with all her heart that the boat would drown him in mid-channel. And then, realizing once more what such a solution would mean to her, she had perforce, as it were, to steady herself, to take her own shoulders, and shake them into sense. For if death were the only way out of it (and what about the World without End ?) it was not Dick's that would do any good. She fought the mænad back into gaol again. She became her normal unbrained self. She wondered crudely if the doctors could help her to solve at any rate half the problem; and she began to ride a little harder, not spectacularly, but taking consistent risks.

"By George!" said Bill one day, neck to neck with her over some brambles; "you're shovin' 'em at it a bit—what?"

They had got away badly from cover, and were perhaps a mile behind the hounds.

"Well," she said, "what does it matter? You'd none of you care a damn."

"Oh, I wasn't worryin' about you," he grinned. "I was thinkin' of the old mare," and then, beyond Bill, a field away, but drawing up a little on his flank, she caught sight for the first time of Dick, neither toy nor monster, but ordinary flesh and blood—so ordinary, indeed, that that was the most surprising thing about him.

It was a warm day of late December, between two and three in the afternoon, and being a Friday, she and Bill were hunting with the Drillmore over

a country north and west of them about ten miles from Windy. It was a good country of small pastures, on the other side of the Durling Hills, but embracing on its eastern boundaries some of the rougher land towards the estuary, the fringes of that bleak stretch of common, through which the Braddle wanders seaward, and that lies extended between Creel and the softer country of the north.

Meeting at Drillmore, too, and losing their first fox about a couple of miles beyond it, they had worked back, drawing the big wood on Corder's Hill, nearly a mile due north of the castle. And it was here that she and Bill, with perhaps half a dozen more, had been left on the wrong side of the cover, the hounds getting away mute to the south-east on the brush of an old grey vixen.

That was why, also, riding now, hell for leather, to make up time, she could not help wondering how it was that Dick came to be here. For he had certainly not been on their side of the wood; and though by temperament he could never have been exactly a thruster (it was curious how well now she seemed to know him) he ought to have been better up than this on that big-limbed chestnut of his—a three-hundred-guinea Irish horse, and the best hunter, she knew, that he possessed.

Then the two Peel boys, and Beatie Cotterell, with Dr. Lennox on his old sorrel, came between them; and, at the same moment Bill, who had drawn ahead of her and of them all, pulled up abruptly on the edge of some ploughland.

"Steady on," he said, "let's see what's goin' to happen."

For from here, above a field or two of declining ground, they could behold in front of them the whole line of campaign; that scent had been foiled, for a moment, by a passing flock of sheep; and that Jack Quirke, the huntsman, was now casting forward. It was a welcome check, with her mare steaming, and the fine panorama, in a slanting sunlight, spread out before her in purple and grey—the broad delta of the common stretching indefinitely eastward, with the pale curves in it, here and there, of the Braddle; the dim plantations of Creel a little further to the south, and the billowy horizon of the Durling Hills. Then a turf-cutter out in the furze suddenly waved his hat, and a whimper blew back to them, heralding the chorus of the hounds. They saw them wavering, a tawny streak, towards the heart of the common, with the main hunt swinging away to the right over the stone bridge that at this point spanned the river.

“He’s going to Creel, bet your boots,” cried one of the Peel boys, and with his brother and one or two farmers galloped away south towards the bridge; and indeed to Berenice and Bill, and the few others that still hesitated, this seemed the most probable event. But then, on the other hand, this was a country that most of them had known since childhood; and they felt now that they held matters well in hand. For there were plenty of fords to the Braddle for parties who didn’t mind getting wet; and here, after all, began to happen that for which they had been waiting, the sudden swerving of the fox to the left, at the first bend of the river, off the common into a big,

neighbouring farm—a mixed, thousand-acre farm, heavily wired throughout, and with a patch of dense wood beyond it. They saw her, breathed, but going strong, taking the far corner of a field, and, pulling his horse round, Bill gave a cry of triumph.

“By george!” he said, “we’re all right. She’s headin’ for Macey’s Wood.”

He made for the road to their left, running from Stoke Michael to Duckmouth, and crossing it, took the near edge of the farm, riding north with the others after him, but forced away from the direct line by the long succession of wired pastures. Even so, however, as he now spluttered to Beatie Cotterell, they ought to be the only ones in it, “what with the huntsmen havin’ to use the nippers an’ all, and the rest of ’em across the river”; and it was then that somebody on his off-side drew up, and shouted in his ear—

“Good lord! I say, look at your sister.”

He glanced back over his shoulder. She had struck diagonally across the farm.

“Doesn’t she know it’s all wired?”

Bill stared after her, frowning.

“I dunno,” he said. “Yes, of course she does,” and then reflected immediately that she alone was on the straight route to the wood. He wondered vaguely if by any chance she had anything up her sleeve; and then remembered that it was she who had first told him about this wire—that she had been caught up here last year, cutting across on her own, and come off over a wall with a ten-foot drop. That must be the wall, too, he supposed,

to which she was apparently now heading, the garden boundary of a former house, but long since part of an isolated orchard.

"By george!" he cried, "she's tryin' it on again."

He flogged his horse round this wider circle.

"By george!" he said, "she'll do us in the eye."

II

And then, as though his envy, made alive and visible, had flung itself headlong across the fields to her, there leapt up suddenly into Berenice's consciousness a new sense of all this life behind her—the race of the blood, the eager muscles, the beating desires that urged them on. She felt them caught up in her, concentrated, and even led. And though presently, soon enough indeed, they would find her out, would wheel askance from that dark prison beyond the wall, yet come what might, and whatever the powers that held her, she would give them all a damned good run for it. They would have to be in at the death. They would have to follow her hard. With each fall of the hoofs beneath her she sped them a separate challenge. She saw them visualized for her and defeated in green strips of field, ribboning out from gate to gate, and huddled behind her into nothingness. She saw them wheedled to that grey wall with its hidden drop—into what? And yet all the time her brain above her held her cool as ice, exulting frostily in the special knowledge, so hardly won last year, that through this maze of wire, on this one only course, lay a clear path for the rider who could take that wall.

Quite clearly, too, as it approached her over each taken gate, she held in her mind every ripple of all that movement about her. She saw hounds flying now almost abreast of her, but up the shorter side of the triangle, half a mile from her and the fox, and with another mile to Macey's Wood. She saw Bill, leading the rest of his companions, the same distance on her left, but with twice her distance to travel. And over her shoulder and behind her, continually spurred and halted, she was aware of the scattering browns and pinks of the remainder of the hunt—the whole as actual an experience as any that she had known, yet touched already with a singular impermanence.

Then the last field ran towards her like a thing fluid as all the rest; the grey wall spanned her world; stood for so many things that she could not distinguish them; bowed its head; dropped beneath her; was behind. And so it was all over, and next moment she was down on her knees in the wet grass, with the old mare, stumbled to her feet again, limping riderless across the orchard.

She picked herself up, wondering vaguely if she had broken any of her bones, and then, finding herself apparently the same woman as before, caught the mare, and bent down to feel her legs. She was conscious, too, as she did so, of an almost tangible transformation; as though her garments had been suddenly changed, and a cell-door opened and closed behind her. She saw the branches above her head lacing themselves dark across the sky, dropping silence about her and moisture—a dead apple lay at her knee. And then, as she knelt

there, she was aware of Dick, taking the wall where she had taken it, with a sharp sound of annoyance, but holding himself up and his horse. She glanced across at him from her task not altogether in surprise. Nor would it be right to suppress the fact that woven deep in that ride had lain the slenderest thread of some desire to seem beautiful again if possible—to appear to him, at any rate, in view of what needs must happen, just for a moment, at her physical best. It was gone now. But it had been there; and pressed hard enough, she would have had to admit it. He slipped out of the saddle, and stood looking at her where she knelt—her hat awry and her hair straggling.

“Good God!” he said, “what made you take that?”

She was silent.

“Didn’t you know?” he said. “I thought that you knew what you were doing.”

“So I did.”

His wrath died from him.

“Then why did you do it?”

“Can’t you guess?”

Long ago now the hunt must have swept by them. Perhaps there had never been a hunt at all.

“You don’t mean——?”

She was bending down again over the swollen fetlock.

“I say, B, you don’t mean——?”

“Yes, I do,” she said, “the old mare’s strained her fetlock.”

“But I say, B—what can I say?”

She stood on her feet. She stood in her prison. The door was shut fast. She examined her gaoler.

"I say, B, —I'm *damned* sorry, you know."

She stared at him stonily, but from so far off that, even as she stared, it amazed her that she could ever for a moment have either revered or loathed him.

She heard him talking to her remotely as from some outside passage.

"Are you sure?"

"Just about."

"Then I say, B, we mustn't wait. You must marry me right off. We must get it fixed up."

She thought that his acting was rather good.

"Poor beast," she said, half aloud.

He took her gloved hand in his own.

"I know," he said, "that's what I am. But look here, B, absolutely straight, I've been having a hell of a bad time."

So a child might have used words, she thought, to which it possessed no clue.

"Have you really?" she inquired.

"And just now—when I saw you vanish, and didn't see you again, I—it was awful, B—I saw you dead, like that feller on that Sunday."

She did not doubt it. She took her hand away.

"Look here, B. I love you."

She turned away from him, stroking the drooped head of her mare.

"You don't believe me?"

And then, as she looked at him, with the twilight building itself about them, it occurred to her suddenly that after all, perhaps, he was really

playing a hard part—that he might even, as far as he knew, be telling her something like the truth—and that the same prison held him, too, if in a nominally different capacity.

“Then you’ll marry me soon—at once—as soon as we can fix the thing up?”

But she shook her head again, sentenced, and holding her wrists up for the fetters, yet still pleading for the last respite allowed.

“Not till I’m certain,” she said, “not till next month. I’ll let you know next month.”

“Then you wouldn’t,” he said, “you wouldn’t marry me anyhow?”

But the thing had drifted past conceiving, and she slipped the bridle over her arm. For she had broken Law, and now Law held her with that which could never be fled away from. And who was to tell her what lay beyond it, or if there were anything there at all?

So, gravely, trudging homewards, she made inquiry of the darkness, with the clop, clop of the mare’s hoofs sounding beside her on the road.

III

Dr. Lennox in his arm-chair stirred his after-dinner coffee.

“Well,” he said, “and what did you tell her?”

It had been a good day, and, comfortably stiff, he stretched his legs to the fire.

“That’s not the point,” said Miss Sary, “the point is her asking me.”

“Where did you meet her?”

“Under the hill. She was leading her mare home lame.”

He filled his pipe, and looked at her whimsically.

"Well," he repeated, "but I should like to know what you told her."

"I recommended her to the parson."

He lit a match.

"What parson? Any parson—or your friend Mr. Thompson?"

Miss Sary ignored him.

"Then it doesn't strike you," she said, "as being at all out of the ordinary?"

"A young lady's sudden interest in the Deity?"

"Don't be impersonal—Berenice's. Did you see her out hunting?"

"Yes, I saw her for a moment or two. She goes too hard for me."

"You—you didn't notice anything yourself, I suppose?"

"No," he said.

"She's coming to see you," said Miss Sary.

He glanced at her quickly, but, knowing her well enough, continued to smoke in silence. Presently she arranged herself in the opposite arm-chair.

"D'you know," she said slowly, "I'd give a lot to have a daughter."

IV

Nor was Miss Sary, as it happened, the only person who had talked to her. For the new Mummy who had bloomed, during these last two or three months, into a really quite passable matron, took her son, on this evening, by the two lapels of his coat, and informed him that she possessed a secret.

"Dear me," he said, "what can it be?"

"I've met her."

His expression changed.

"Berenice?"

"M'm."

He had coloured a little. His eyes puzzled her

"I've asked her to tea."

She became frightened.

"You don't think that I've been forward?"

He was silent for a moment. Then he smiled.

"Not if you talked to her nicely."

"I didn't drop an h—not one."

He put his hand over her lips.

"Now you know I didn't mean that."

"I know you didn't."

It was time for supper. He offered her his arm with an obeisance.

"Allow me."

"Silly boy."

But she took it, pressing it against her. And he knew that even if it were to happen, that impossible thing of which he dreamed, nobody else could ever take her place—of whom it is pleasant to relate that, if this had been her history, these last, perhaps, would have been its golden chapters.

CHAPTER XXV

I

So, as wayfarers forced at last into the companionship of a moment, our fellow-travellers are to be seen face to face; not without, on both sides, a certain natural self-consciousness, but—as victims of a common exigency—at least so far honest. How they have come here, equally held up on their two various journeys, can at best have been told only in part. And whither, in a breath or two, they are to go upon paths so apparently diverse can scarcely, perhaps, even be guessed. Suffice it that for a still hour on a January afternoon they have met in the roadway between Milestone and Stack; that a mild sky, yet hinting frost, still contains the falling sun; that both are warm from exercise and stoutly clad; and that upon a landscape always sparse they seem to be the only figures. Let the reminder, too, be added, to explain a subsequent phenomenon, that as the hills rise behind them so seaward the land slopes, field after field, till the stone walls die, and the downs stand free above the blue; and that spread before them lies, therefore, much of the scene of this little drama—the trees round Windy, the tip of the church, the wrinkled line of Kilridge valley, and

beyond them all the pale circle of the sea. She held out her hand.

"I wanted to see you," she said. "I wanted to ask you about God."

She did not know (how could she ?) that their moods had clashed—that for the moment, at any rate, he was not thinking about God; and that the very bluntness of her statement had made something else more difficult for him.

Then he said to her—

"But why do you ask me ?"

"Because I thought," she said, "that you'd tell me the truth. And because I've got nobody else to ask."

He looked at her in silence.

Then he said to her slowly—

"But what is it that you want to know about Him ?"

She frowned a little, and then admitted—

"Pretty nearly everythin', I'm afraid. Who He is; or What; an' where exactly I can find Him."

It occurred then to Mr. Thompson that she must really be rather stupid, since already, and at such a cost, he had twice made himself so explicit. And yet it was not wholly an unlovable stupidity. They sat down near to one another on a long heap of stones.

"But those are very big questions," he said
"They're perhaps the biggest questions of all."

"That's what I thought."

"And I'm afraid I don't know."

"You don't know ?"

He shook his head.

"I haven't found Him myself, you see."

"But you're lookin'?"

"Yes, I'm looking."

"An' you've found *somethin'*?"

Her eyes seemed sure of it. He looked into them curiously.

"But have I? How do you know? What have I found?"

"I don't know. But you have, haven't you?"—she was staring at him quite frankly. "I mean you're different, you know; different from me an' other people."

It was his turn then to play the inquisitor, searching that steadfast gaze. For did she really think that? Did she think it still?

"That's one of the reasons," she said, "why I thought that I'd better come to you."

There was driven by a farmer's trap, whose owner saluted Berenice. The eyes of them both followed its movements as it disappeared down the road. Then Mr. Thompson, who had been juggling with two granite chips, dropped them suddenly, and faced her once more.

"Look here," he said, "do you really mean all this?"

"Why, of course I do. What else do you suppose?"

"Then you won't mind what I say? I mean, I can just say to you what comes next?"

"Well, of course you can. That's just what I want."

He sat round a little, facing her more directly, his hands clasped about one knee. With these last

words, too, he was conscious—and he thought that she felt the same—of a rather wonderful readjustment of their relations; of the replacing in them, for all that had gone before, by a quite simple but extraordinary friendliness. He saw, also, that while in spite of himself he must still stand for her *in loco dei* there was now a rightness about this almost solemnly exacting. For he had done his best. And he was still there. And he saw now that this was not uncommon; that even so, and for somebody, we must all stand now and then; that it was an obligation of our humanity; that a Man had once stood thus for the world.

And after all, what did it mean, save that he was her senior, perhaps, by a step or two? To-morrow morning she would see him human. To-morrow night she might have outstripped him.

"Well, look here," he said; "I'll tell you just where I've got to."

II

"And so it seems to me," he concluded, "that that must always come first. It's hard to put it right. But I mean that to find Him has got to become the big thing—has got to become the biggest thing before us."

She stared at him thoughtfully.

"Then you think," she said, "that there is a God?"

"I didn't say that. People that I respect seem to have evidence of it."

"But you yourself—have *you* got any evidence?"

He hesitated for a moment.

"Only that—that up to now, perhaps, I've seemed to know what comes next."

"You mean with regard to your mother?"

"Well, boiled down, yes, it amounts to that."

She was silent, tapping the roadway with her stick.

"She was my one, you see. The old Father was quite right. I didn't think that there was one. But there was—my own gate—just before me. There was no doubt of it. And what I know, I know because I went through it. It isn't much, of course," he smiled, "but at least it's real—and—and first-hand."

He tilted his head a little, examining her critically.

"Well, that's all," he said, "is it any good to you?"

Like Another before her, she bent her head for a moment, and drew a pattern in the dust.

Then she looked up.

"I ought to have told you," she said, "that I'm goin' to have a child."

She spoke quite normally, but even so, he could not at first realise what she had said. Then he repeated the words automatically with an absurd lack of expression.

"You—you say that you're going to have a child?"

She nodded her head, still looking gravely at his face.

"But are you sure? How do you know?"

"I saw the doctor last night."

He picked up some stones, and let them slide again through his fingers.

"And you mean that you—you haven't been married?"

"Yes," she said. "That's exactly what I mean."

He was silent again. Then he stretched his shoulders.

"Look here," he said, "before we go on, do you mind if I tell you something too?"

And yet already, even, he knew that a hand, as from behind his shoulder, had wiped that dream from his future's slate. But it seemed important, and he continued, though he could not quite tell why.

"And so if I had dared," he said, "I should have asked you to marry me."

She opened her eyes a little.

"But not now—not after what I've just told you?"

He looked at her vaguely, not perceiving her meaning; and then—closer to her than any soul had ever been—stared amazed into the depths of her humility.

"But, good lord," he cried, "don't you see—don't you see?"

He stopped helplessly, groping about for words.

"But, don't you see," he said, "that the question can't even be put?—not if I love you—not if—I say, what's the matter?"

"Yes, I see," she said, "I think I see what you mean."

Through a cranny in him, the older Thompson put up his hand, and begged.

"I suppose there *isn't* a chance ? I suppose you *couldn't* marry me, could you ?"

But she shook her head; and indeed he knew that she could never see him like that—that for good or evil she saw him differently—that one doesn't marry one's prophets.

They looked down again upon the January world.

"Well, let's try," he said, "and work-the thing out."

III

It was her turn then to put the facts before him. When she had finished, he was staring away from her out to sea.

"But this fellow," he said, "this Dick Bolton—does he love you ?"

She pondered for a moment.

"Well, I think he does," she said, "I think he loves part of me, anyway."

"And what about you ?"

"Well, in a sense, I suppose, part of me has loved him."

"But now ?"

"I don't know. It's sort of paralysed, you see. It's sort of numb."

She stretched out her legs, looking down at them impartially.

"And anyway it's the kid that's the important thing. Or don't you think so ? Don't you think that it is ?"

He met her eyes again.

"Well, yes," he said, "I suppose it is."

"You see," she went on, "it's not as if it was all my own. Part of it's his. We—we've sort of gone into partnership."

She bent her eyebrows a little, half in apology.

"I've been thinkin' about it rather a lot, you see," she explained, "and anyway, all that part of it's been decided. I've just been to see him at Stack. We're to get married next week. There was the kid, you see. If I'd refused, what about that? I mean, as things are, it would have been a bit rough on it, don't you think?"

She crossed her knees, bending her walking-stick in front of them.

"And, I say," she said, "don't you think it's rather rum—that it should be here with us now—really alive, an' all that? That's the reason, you know, why I wanted to see you. I wanted to know what's at the back of it all."

He was still silent, watching the rising mist. A new shyness stood for a moment in her eyes.

"Do you think," she said, "that the kid can be my gate?"

Then he turned to her abruptly. He heard himself talking to her as from a long way off.

"Look here," he said, "did you *know* that I loved you?"

She leaned back a little, regarding him soberly.

"I suppose I did," she said, "I suppose that's why I'm here."

He took a deep breath. From somewhere behind them rose the harsh call of a pheasant. A

stone between them tinkled down upon the roadway.

"Why, good lord," he said, "how blind we've been."

"Blind ?"

"Why, don't you see—it's the commonest thing upon earth."

"God ?"

THE END

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